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The Economist
LIFE, CULTURE, STYLE AND PLACES

intelligent life

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WHEN WAS IT?

MIST
A PHOTO ESSAY

WARHOL RULES
But why? By Bryan Appleyard

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MEXICO'S UNDERGROUND LAKES
LEONARDO'S OTHER WOMAN
THE LAST DAYS OF **HANDWRITING**
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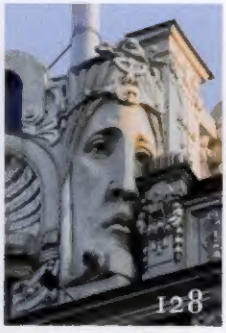
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COVER PHOTOGRAPH **PHILIPPE HALSMAN**

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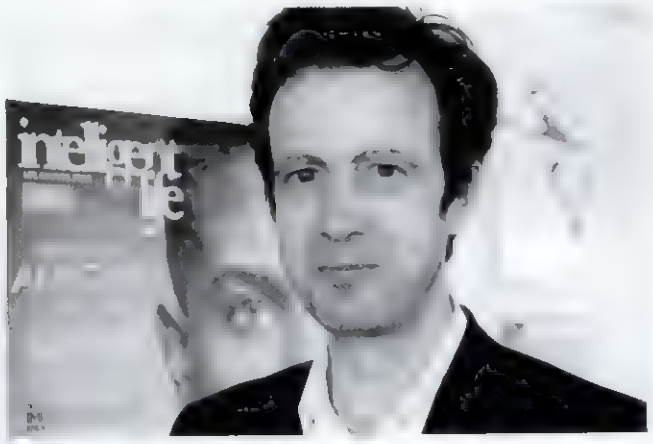
Weighing up Warhol

OUR COVER STAR is an artist who died 24 years ago, peaked about 20 years before that, and could easily be half-forgotten by now. Instead he looms larger than ever. Andy Warhol accounts for 17% of the market in contemporary art. If you were a collector keen to get your hands on one of his best-known works, and happened to have some Venetian masters to off-load, you would have to sell five Titians to buy one Warhol. In **A one-man market** (*page 66*), a leading feature writer and cultural commentator, Bryan Appleyard, works out how this happened and what it means.

Most people will never know what it's like to live with a Warhol, but in May I spent a few days with one. I was staying at a hotel in Stockholm, the Rival, owned by Benny Andersson from Abba. On its wall is a set of Warhol prints of Ingrid Bergman. It's great to see her: a beautiful face, a fine actress, a local heroine. But then you see her again and again, because she gazes down on the spot where you wait for the lift, and she discloses no hidden depths. The prints might as well be posters: you can understand why Andersson has them in his hotel, not his home.

A couple of months earlier I was in Hamburg, where there is a newish museum called Beatlemania. As well as 11 permanent rooms devoted to the Beatles, in Hamburg and beyond, it has a space for temporary exhibitions, which was filled with Warhols for a show entitled "Pop Meets Pop". It was telling to see pop art in the context of pop music. Gazing at a set of Marilyns or Liza Minnellis or John Lennons, with "All My Loving" and "Hey Jude" still ringing in my head, I was struck by a simple truth: the songs have aged much better than the pictures. The Warhols are flat, bland, one-dimensional. The songs, for all the limitations of rock and pop and the familiarity of the Beatles, have more to them. Even after 40 years, you can keep on finding fresh pleasure in them.



Warhol is still interesting, and immensely influential: largely responsible, for good or ill, for Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Lady Gaga. He was a visionary who saw a new age coming over the horizon, the age of celebrity. But to call him America's Picasso, as some of Appleyard's witnesses do, is astonishing. Picasso had more ideas than Warhol had cans of soup. Warhol had one idea, and used it again and again.

At a concert in London in July, I got talking to a man from Helsingborg, the corner of Sweden that is almost in Denmark. He spoke English even more idiomatically than the Swedes I had come across in Stockholm. I asked how come it was so good. "Well," he said, "I grew up watching 'Blackadder'."

"Blackadder" has become one of those series that never go away. Another is "QI", packed with timeless factoids and fragments of unconventional wisdom. In **A whim of iron** (*page 102*) Charles Nevin profiles the man behind both, John Lloyd. Not content with making millions of us laugh while also leaving us better-informed, Lloyd is now embarking on a cycle of novels.

Robert Butler has been ever-present in *Intelligent Life* since 2007, starting with an entertaining piece about people who were turning a radical shade of green, including one family who had given up their fridge. Butler has written our **Going Green** column (*page 48*) ever since, but has come to find the heading a straitjacket. When we let him out to write about an amateur weatherman who was outforecasting the professionals, he enjoyed the fresh air so much that we are switching him to a roving brief as contributing editor. A new columnist starts next time. - TIM DE LISLE

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Showing some backbone
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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE ECONOMIST John Micklethwait

LETTERS

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Re: A man's guide to a woman's wardrobe (Style, September/October)

While Luke Leitch lamented the men who patiently tolerate women's fashions in a patronising tone, he engaged in similar behaviour. The article implied women's fashion choices were part of some great psychological mystery that men may never understand. He took the same condescending point of view as thinkers such as Freud and Nietzsche when they analysed the minds of women.

What's more, the article focused on a small selection of women – rich and white – as if only their sense of fashion was worth exploring.

While trying to present himself as the understanding, sympathetic hapless male who "saw the light" after being thrown into the fashion industry against his will, the author maintained a smug, you-poor-women-who-are-slaves-to-the-fashion-industry attitude. We need to get past it.

NEW BLACK WOMAN, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

I thought Luke Leitch's article about women's fashion hit the nail on the head, with one exception: its comparison of fashion with sport. Fashion is not a matter of loyalty. For those who do take an interest in fashion it can be a distraction from daily life and a means of self-expression, but all women have their limits. Wearing a box on one's head, as seen at Dior Couture, is too ridiculous an ask. Men, however, will happily follow their team wherever it takes them.

But rather than trying to understand the opposite sex, should we not appreciate its enigma? Women will fail to understand why men care so much about sport, and men will fail to understand why women are devoted to clothes that are likely to be "last season" by next week. And what's wrong with that?

HANNA DUGGAL, BIRMINGHAM

Rock opera

Re: The King and I (Features, September/October)

While I understand Ray Connolly's love for the early Elvis, the atomic sensation of the 1950s, Elvis's voice was at its best in later years, even as his health got weaker. As Bono said, Elvis became an operatic singer towards the end of his career. You can hear that quality in his very last concerts. Elvis didn't die after he left the army, as John Lennon said.

RAFFAELE GRECO, FRANKFURT, GERMANY

It always intrigues me how Americans don't get the significance of Elvis. He inadvertently started the culture of youth. As Ray Connolly pointed out, before Elvis teenagers were simply mirrors of their parents. His music, his performance and what he came to symbolise changed all that. Suddenly youth had its own identity which is now taken for granted. Few people in history have caused such a transformation in society and culture.

HELGA MITCHELL, CONSTANTIA, CAPE TOWN

As a follower of Elvis since the age of eight in 1956, when "Heartbreak Hotel" changed the world, I have devoured more than 400 books about him and, without any doubt, Elvis was the greatest interpreter of song who ever drew breath. What's more, no other artist treated his fans with more respect and gratitude. The annual Candlelight Vigil at his home in Memphis speaks volumes. What killed Elvis Presley was a combination of things but, at the core, was a controlling, greedy manager who knew how to play the entire Presley family for his own ends. Elvis was a southern gentleman of the old school and on a handshake he remained loyal to Colonel Parker at the cost of his own artistic dreams. It is the greatest crime in rock'n'roll history.

JUNE ROBERTSON, MIDDLESBROUGH

Karma in Kabul

Re: Cool under fire (Culture, September/October)

Rory Stewart writes of a "shattered Bodhisattva" which "seems to be mourning all the cracks and plaster joints of its reconstruction"; that "hero statues were destroyed" and "then repaired. Then smashed again by the Taliban, and again repaired."

This cycle of destruction and reconstruction will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Buddhism. Impermanence is deeply embedded in Buddhist philosophy. The fate of these glorious, tragic statues reflects the fate of every object, being and thought that ever existed or, more precisely, appeared to exist. Nothing lasts.

This does not make the treasures of the Kabul Museum in any way

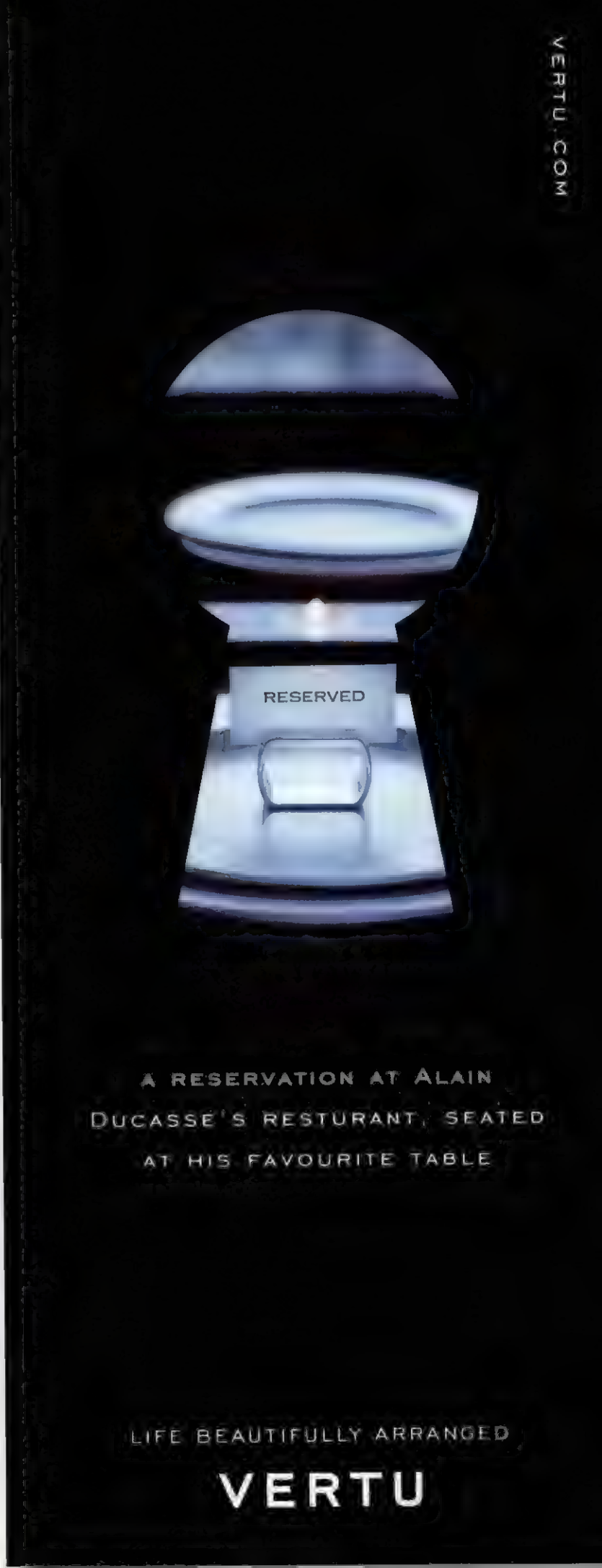
less precious: wanton destruction is wholly to be condemned. But change has its own pace. It is deliberate and inevitable. When we fail to perceive this, we are truly shattered – although never beyond repair.
BRENDAN KELLY, DUBLIN

Perfect for a staycation
Re: Being There – São Paulo (Places, September/October)
Helen Joyce writes that "what Paulistanos do, every chance they get, is leave". Sure we leave, but it is usually due to work. São Paulo has the charm of dark corners and broken sidewalks hiding wonderful bars and eateries, the vibe and energy of people talking aloud at tables on Vila Madalena, the traditional *butecos* (cheap bars), the *padarias* (bakeries) with amazing food. The city is considered as exciting culturally as many other famous cities – with international film festivals, art galleries, theatres and the lush Ibirapuera park. Although there is generalised chaos, traffic jams and violence, I'm a king here.
MAURÍCIO PUPO, SÃO PAULO

I agree with Helen Joyce's vision of São Paulo. The city has very creative businesspeople and entrepreneurs but it lacks long-term strategic politics.

The last nine years, under the populist presidency of the Workers' Party, pushed the state and federal partnerships away from the city. That is one of the reasons for the lack of investment in infrastructure in the city.
DANILO MOZELI, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

I lived in São Paulo ten years ago and I had a maid. She came every day, cooked, cleaned and shopped. I wanted her to spend every last real I gave her on cleaning products or non-perishable goods – anything but holding onto the currency. The fear of inflation and the cataclysmic erosion of the value of money were >



> still strong. It's true that São Paulo was a bargain for those with American dollars – it was the sweet life. But the gap between rich and poor was painfully obvious. Although I had a great flat, I preferred Mexico or even Argentina. Both had more of a middle class, which was a buffer between me and a stark reminder that I was playing the "capitalist pig".
FRANCINE McKENNA, CHICAGO

Careers advice
Re: Inspiring women (Supplement, September/October)
Elin Hurvenes's quote from Elizabeth Grieg about "expanding your platform" really resonated with me. As a young woman who is in the early stages of her career, I often try to look forward and think about what I want to achieve, but it can be really difficult to identify the right pathway. The advice that you can only launch yourself from your current base of knowledge and experience was useful for me. It has helped me to concentrate on what I can build up now, in order to achieve what I want to in the future.
SUSANNAH FITZHERBERT-BROCKHOLES, LONDON

Not a sausage
Re: Stove Notes (Intelligence, Summer)
With all due respect, I must disagree with some of the ingredients Simon Hopkinson chose for his paella recipe. Chorizo is only used for a kind of rice-based dish called *Arroz al Horno* which is not cooked in a paella pan. Chorizo in paella, especially if it is chopped up – when it releases so much paprika and flavour – is extremely alien to the Spanish.
JAVIER LEAL

The god of condiments
Re: Just awesome (Intelligence, September/October)
I once sat down for lunch at a bistro in Toronto and ordered a chicken wrap with a side of salad. The waiter asked if that would be all. I said yes. "Awesome," he replied, "I'll get right on that." I couldn't take it any more. I turned to the waiter and asked, "Awesome? Really?" He looked confused. "I'll tell you what would be awesome," I said. "It would be awesome if somehow, the hand of God lifted the ceiling from this place, reached in and passed me the salt. *That* would be awesome!"
SLLOVE

An exasperated father once sat down with his teenage daughter. He had decided it was time to lay down the law. "There are two words", he began, "that I never again want to hear used in this household. One is 'gross', and the other is 'awesome'."

"Sure, Dad," his daughter replied. "What are they?"
JIM

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LOOK OUT FOR THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY ISSUE OF INTELLIGENT LIFE, ON SALE DECEMBER 12TH

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

In our last issue, a panel of *Economist* writers set about answering the first of our Big Questions: what is the capital of the world today? *The Economist*'s globalisation editor, John Parker, awarded the gong to London, just ahead of New York. Others spoke up for New York, Beijing, Delhi, Singapore and Washington, DC. On our website, we launched a readers' poll. What followed was a heated discussion and impassioned defence of many cities, from the obvious to the obscure.

Many readers quibbled with the Parker Scale, which rated each contender out of five on five criteria – power and influence, income and wealth, education, global connections and culture. Polly Pearson suggested that cleanliness, health, green space, happiness and the gap between rich and poor should be taken into consideration. Anthony Hall thought that vulnerability to natural disasters should have a bearing, which would count against Washington and New York. Buongiorno2 championed Paris as an "alpha city" and financial hub. And why did Delhi score only one (out of five) for culture? "Goes to show what you know about India and Delhi," said Rohan Jolly.

One UN employee (UNGuy) suggested that we start by identifying future sites for the UN headquarters. "Relocating to another established or upcoming A-list country would be totally unsuitable," he said. "The ideal would be a highly accessible small-to-medium size democracy, big enough to absorb the UN, but small enough to show it respect. It should be in a time zone where office hours overlap with many capitals and peace-keeping operations, and have enough space available to build. Istanbul?"

As this issue went to press, the poll had attracted almost 5,000 votes. New York, the UN's current home, was in the lead with 34%. London was a distant second, with 21%; Singapore an unexpected third, with 18%. Washington, for all its power, was in fourth place with 6%, pursued by the cities rising in the East, Shanghai, Beijing and Delhi, on 3-4% apiece. Among the contenders suggested by readers, Stockholm (for its efficiency and neutrality), Brussels (as capital of Europe and an administrative hub) and Istanbul again ("with its eye-dazzlingly rich history, centuries-old role as an imperial capital and its religious and cultural diversity," according to Murat Ozel) all had dedicated support. Nicosia less so.

Africa, Australasia and the Middle East were barely represented, and although there was a consensus that the developing world would have its day soon, the might of New York and London prevails for now. John Parker had them tying on all counts except power and influence, where, although neither shone, he felt London had the edge. But New York has our readers' hearts – and votes. - GEORG A[illegible]R.MOND

Voting and comments still open at moreintelligentlife.com

THIS SEASON

MOMA

EXHIBITIONS

A man in love with walls

Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was several people in one. A political partisan and rebellious spirit, he was also a painter, illustrator, architect, draughtsman, costume designer and sculptor. His private life was a whirlwind: Frida Kahlo was wife No 3, and 4 (they married, divorced and remarried). But Rivera's real love affair was with the wall. Bursting with colour, packed with detail and full of fantasy, his murals are mind-boggling. Like meaty scenes from an epic novel, they are magical storyboards that find their way deep into the imagination.

Strongly influenced by the Mexican revolution, Rivera believed in art for all. He wanted his work to be accessible, on public walls, not just gallery ones. In 1931, the Museum of Modern Art in New York offered him a big solo show. Arriving six weeks early, he was given an empty gallery to create eight portable murals. Eighty years later, five of them are back where they began.

They appear alongside a selection of drawings, watercolours and prints plus Rivera's controversial designs for the Rockefeller Centre, begun while in residence at MOMA. "Frozen Assets" is the most surprising mural on show. It's American, not Mexican, and shows New York's jagged skyline, an unemployment shelter and a bank vault. It's a gutsy statement to make mid-Depression. When Rivera arrived in New York, almost a quarter of all Americans were unemployed. His work asked big questions. During a global crisis, how could art tackle social and economic problems? If only we had the answer. - OLIVIA WEINBERG

Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art MoMA, New York, November 13th to May 14th

EXHIBITIONS AT A GLANCE

Winter Tales (Kunst Historisches Museum, Vienna, October 18th to January 8th). A show full of wintry charm, with over 180 works on display, going back to 1450 and including Turner, Bruegel, Courbet and Monet. Take a hat and scarf.

Drawn to Art: French Artists & Art Lovers in 18th-Century Rome (National Gallery of Canada, October 21st to January 2nd). Who came first, the French or the Italians? This wealth of paintings, drawings and prints should help make your mind up.

Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-1935 (Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 29th to January 22nd). Russian avant-garde architecture is still bold, energetic and intense. Lots to get your teeth into here.

Modern Antiquity: Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, and Picabia in the Presence of the Antique (J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa, Malibu, November 2nd to January 16th). The big four are back. From 1905 to 1935, they transformed our view of antiquity, and this exhibition will show how. Picasso's women, de Chirico's piazzas, Léger's nudes and Picabia's "transparencies" never get old.

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan (National Gallery, London, November 9th to February 5th). *See page 114.*

Terence Conran: The Way We Live Now (Design Museum, London, November 16th to March 4th). From Habitat to his new collection for M&S, has anyone done more to earn that subtitle?

Danser Sa Vie (Pompidou Centre, Paris, November 23rd to April 2nd). In true Pompidou style, this is a jazzy show. It covers 2,000 sq metres, arranged over three acts and explores the link between dance and the visual arts. - OW

TALKS

The craic in Krakow

In homage to a sea-going novelist, the tower of a medieval square in Krakow will turn into a lighthouse on the first night of the Conrad Festival. Conrad is not the only author being celebrated: though the festival is only three years old, its organisers aim to make it the leading literary event in central Europe by drawing writers from abroad. (It coincides with Krakow's book fair, which has 30,000 visitors.) Speakers include the Italian Roberto Calasso, the Canadian-Argentine Alberto Manguel and the London-based, Krakow-born Eva Hoffman. The novelist Janusz Rudnicki (a Solidarity veteran) and the journalist-translator Maciej Zaremba are in the Polish contingent; the controversial Michel Houellebecq represents France. - ANTHONY GARDNER

Conrad Festival November 2nd-6th

TALKS AT A GLANCE

Samuel L. Jackson (Times Centre, New York, October 24th). For a leading actor to wait until 62 to make his Broadway debut takes some explaining. He discusses his career and new role as Martin Luther King in "The Mountaintop".

Umberto Eco (Kensington Town Hall, London, November 19th). Eco's new 19th-century conspiracy novel "The Prague Cemetery" – a thinking person's "Da Vinci Code" – has offended both the Vatican and the Chief Rabbi of Rome. He defends it at Intelligence Squared.

Winter Wordfest (Cambridge, November 27th). Dickens's 200th birthday is celebrated by Claire Tomalin, and *Private Eye*'s 50th by Ian Hislop, at this one-day event, also featuring Diana Athill and Ali Smith (see *page 108*). - AG

GUSTAVE LE GRAY THE BRIG 1856 © V&A IMAGES

PHOTOGRAPHY

The V&A finally gives the camera its due

In a long-overdue move, the V&A is expanding its exhibition space for photography into a handsome new gallery dedicated to showing works from its permanent collection. Room 100, on the first floor (above the existing photography space), was originally the gallery where drawing competitions were judged, and as part of the refurbishment, its series of semi-circular paintings in the half-lights below the high ceiling has been restored. The first hang, which will be in place for 18 months, measures out a period from the invention of photography in 1839 to the 1960s, and features some of the collection's greatest hits – an Anna Atkins cyanotype from the early 1850s, a Gustave Le Gray seascape "The Brig" (1856, *above*), a Muybridge "Leapfrog" from "Animal Locomotion" (1887), a Stieglitz portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe (1918), a Man Ray of Lee Miller (c.1930) and Harold Edgerton's milk drop falling into liquid (1957).

Other, less exhibited pictures begin to suggest the true extent of the collection, and this first show is particularly strong at its later end, with Seydou Keïta's "Elegant Young Man Holding a Flower" (1958), a print from Shomei Tomatsu's 1961 series "Nagasaki", Ed Ruscha's artist's book "Every Building on the Sunset Strip" (1966), and works from three American-based photographers who led the way from journalism towards a more personal art – Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus. "In Focus" sections are dedicated to photographers whose work the museum holds in depth, in this case Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79) and Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), represented by a group of pictures from 1932, one of his greatest years. It includes "Pont de l'Europe, Paris" – the man leaping the puddles on the bridge over the Gare St-Lazare. Probably his most famous photograph, it perfectly exhibits the meeting of composition and chance that defined the decisive moment. - LIZ JOBEY

The Photographs Gallery V&A, London, opens October 25th, entry free

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THEATRE

To discomfort and beyond

With its razzamatazz, Broadway hardly seems the place for Sam Gold. This smart, 33-year-old director has a gift for the pregnant moment – the pause of discomfort, the beat of irritation, the brush of misunderstanding. His theatre feels a lot like life, in all its melancholy and wry humour. But awards and steady success for his productions of new plays by young writers (Annie Baker, Will Eno, Stephen Belber) have made his move to a bigger stage feel inevitable. His busy autumn schedule includes a Broadway debut, directing the world premiere of "Seminar", a dark comedy from Theresa Rebeck. It stars Alan Rickman as a literary legend who teaches a writing class to a handful of students. With his growl of a baritone and dry seethe, Rickman is now best known for stealing scenes on screen, most recently as Professor Snape in the Harry Potter films. His presence on stage is similarly magnetic, his charisma like aged whisky – smooth, restrained and with a delicate burn.

Gold's talent is for probing the intimate corners of a script, and it's hard to say how this will work in a grand house. But this is what excites him. He became a director to tell stories, and the thrill is in telling them in different contexts, to audiences of different ages and sizes. "I like to do plays that I think I can fail at directing," he explains. This has led to some unexpected choices, such as his 2008 production of a pirate puppet musical, "Jollyship the Whiz-Bang" – acclaimed by the *New York Times* for its "demented brilliance" and Gold's keen comic timing. But his best work explores the dimensions of contemporary relationships, particularly among people who struggle to express themselves. In "The Aliens", his award-winning 2010 production of Baker's minimalist play, an actor sat and repeated the word "ladder" over and over, long past the point of discomfort. The effect was first funny, then odd, then unsettling, then deeply affecting. For Gold to have the confidence to create this moment is a gift to the stage. Broadway will surely benefit. - EMILY BOBROW

Seminar *John Golden Theatre, New York, from October 27th*

THEATRE AT A GLANCE

27 (Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, October 21st to November 12th). Abi Morgan is always a compelling voice, from the office intrigues of her newsroom drama "The Hour" to her sexually discomfiting new film "Shame", which won best actor at Venice for Michael Fassbender. This play, written for the National Theatre of Scotland, is set in very different territory – a convent in terminal decline – and explores dementia, ageing and the whereabouts of the modern soul.

Hamlet (Young Vic, London, October 28th to January 21st). London audiences add another hot-ticket Dane to their collection, as David Tennant, Rory Kinnear and Jude Law are joined by Michael Sheen, a great inhabitor of real people's skins — Tony Blair, Kenneth Williams, David Frost. But Hamlet is a more elusive quarry. Whatever decisions he makes about his character, the Young Vic is a great, intimate space to watch so finely tuned an actor.

The Lion in Winter (Theatre Royal Haymarket, London, November 4th to January 28th). Revival as high-wire act: James Goldman's play is strung somewhere between bitter family tragedy and high-camp comedy, so there's a risk of Robert Lindsay's Henry II gurning at Eleanor of Aquitaine as if she were poor Zoë Wanamaker in "My Family". But if Trevor Nunn can get Lindsay to stop twitching and double-taking, his undoubted talent could still shine through.

Reasons to be Pretty (Almeida, London, November 10th to January 14th). The Almeida completes its British premieres of Neil LaBute's trilogy on our obsession with appearance. LaBute directs, which should foreground his sharp wit; Billie Piper heads a pretty cast.

Dick Whittington (New Wimbledon, London, December 9th to January 15th). At last, a dame worthy of the name: Edna Everage, Barry Humphries' still-kicking alter ego, makes her panto debut. Expect gladioli, a galaxy of sequins, and some slightly non-plussed children. - ISABEL LLOYD

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ROCK AT A GLANCE

Kate Bush: 50 Words for Snow (album, November 21st). Her second album this year, and unlike the first, it's a set of new songs. The question is whether the most influential woman in rock is still finding new paths at 53. On paper, with only seven tracks stretching over 65 minutes, there's a whiff of her disciple Joanna Newsom.
Florence + The Machine: Ceremonials (October 31st). Second album from another of Bush's children. Early in 2009, Florence Welch was bottom of the bill on an *NME* tour. Even in a half-hour early-evening slot, her strengths shone out like her red hair: foghorn vocals, blazing star quality and the fearlessness of the oddball. "Lungs" went on to sell 2m copies; will she do an Adele with the follow-up, or a Duffy?
Anna Calvi (European tour, to November 20th; north American tour, December 3rd-13th). Baroque pop with strong tunes, stark arrangements, stern hair and slinky red shirts. - TD.

ROCK

One-man genre

In March Tom Waits was inducted to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in New York. "They say I have no hits and that I'm difficult to work with," Waits observed, "like it's a bad thing." Who needs hits when you have a signature as strong as his? On "Bad As Me", his 17th studio album and first set of new songs since 2004, Waits remains a one-man genre, squeezing fresh life out of the blues, the folk ballad and the cabaret song, and wielding his distinctive arsenal of bangs, clangs, growls and howls. Your ears may run for cover at times, but your heart and soul will be happy to settle down with these 13 tracks (16 on the deluxe version), all co-written by Waits's wife and partner in crime, Kathleen Brennan. With songs called "Last Leaf" and "After We Die", the subject matter goes to infirmity and beyond. In between the funny noises, Waits keeps showing his elegiac side. He even brings out a delicate falsetto. TIM DE LISLE

Bad As Me Europe October 24th, America October 25th

ILLUSTRATION **KATHRYN RATHKE**

FILM

Miranda pulls it off

The director-actress Miranda July is also a short-story writer and artist, which means words like "fey" crop up in reviews of her films. For every critic who loved "Me and You and Everyone We Know" (2005), another was put off by its whimsy. The doubters won't be glad to hear that the follow-up, "The Future", features a talking cat, the Man in the Moon and someone with the psychic power to stop time in its tracks. July and Hamish Linklater play a Gen-X couple coasting along in low-stress jobs in LA, where they've been "gearing up to do something incredible for the past 15 years". They're finally forced to engage with life by the prospect of domestic responsibility. A baby on the way? Not quite. In their world, responsibility means owning a cat. But if the characters are as flaky as July's detractors accuse her of being, the film examines their mid-youth crisis with compassion and wit. Its questions aren't relevant just to hipsters with painstakingly unkempt hair, but to me and you and everyone we know. - NICHOLAS BARBER

The Future British release November 4th

FILM AT A GLANCE

Adventures Of Tintin: Secret Of The Unicorn (October 26th) Hergé's intrepid reporter helped inspire Indiana Jones, so it's right and proper that Steven Spielberg (with a little help from Peter Jackson) should bring him to the big screen. Jamie Bell dons the performance-capture suit which will merge him with 3D animation.
In Time (November 1st). Andrew Niccol, the writer of "Gattaca" and "The Truman Show", holds up another satirical mirror to contemporary vanities. In a world where the wealthy can be 25 for ever, Justin Timberlake and Amanda Seyfried are the fugitives for whom time is running out.
The Rum Diary (November 4th). Johnny Depp's obsession with Hunter S. Thompson persists, but "The Rum Diary" is more notable for the return of Bruce Robinson, writer-director of "Withnail & I", 19 years after he last made a film.
Wuthering Heights (November 11th). Two months on from "Jane Eyre", "Wuthering Heights" promises to be a different story, directed as it is by Andrea Arnold, the maker of two shattering council-block thrillers. She casts an unknown black actor, James Howson, as Heathcliff.
Take Shelter (November 25th). This ominous southern gothic drama gives a welcome leading role to Michael Shannon ("Revolutionary Road"). As usual, he seems both fragile and terrifyingly tough.
Resistance (November 25th). A stark adaptation of Owen Sheers's novel, set in a parallel 1944. The Nazis occupy Britain and Andrea Riseborough is the Welsh farmer's wife who finds a charming German goose-stepping into town.
Hugo (December 2nd). Few directors can now avoid making a 3D film derived from a graphic novel, even Martin Scorsese. Based on "The Invention of Hugo Cabret", "Hugo" is equally concerned with the invention of cinema. Ben Kingsley plays one of the founding fathers, George Méliès. - NB

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CLASSICAL AT A GLANCE

Wexford Festival Opera (from October 21st). This small company is braving Ireland's crippling recession and continuing to revive forgotten works: this year Ambroise Thomas's "La Cour de Célimène", Roman Statkowski's "Maria", and Donizetti's "Gianni di Parigi". The venue, a beautiful new auditorium in a picturesque fishing port, is a treat in itself.

Castor and Pollux (English National Opera, London, from October 24th). A co-production with the Komische Oper Berlin, this will be the ENO's first ever Rameau opera, and with Christian Curnyn on the podium the Baroque authenticity of the performance is guaranteed. Allan Clayton and Roderick Williams, as the twins, lead a sparky cast.

Les Contes d'Hoffmann (Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich, from October 31st). With the endlessly self-renewing Rolando Villazón in the title role, and Diana Damrau as his shape-shifting tormentor, this production will draw the crowds. The question is, what slant will the maverick director Richard Jones give it?

Hélène Grimaud (Cité de la musique, Paris, from November 4th). "Domaine privé" is the subtitle for a week of concerts and chats led by this provocatively original French pianist. Kicking off with Bach and the Kammerorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunk, she moves on to Mozart, Schumann and Shostakovich.

La Sonnambula (Royal Opera House, London, from November 2nd). Marco Arturo Marelli's graceful production of Bellini's sublime opera is revived with two fabulous bel cantists, Celso Albelo and Eglise Gutiérrez.

Faust (Met, New York, from November 29th). Premiered by the ENO, Des McAnuff's atomic-bomb production of Gounod's classic won't make any more dramatic sense when it opens in New York, but the cast is dynamite: how often do Jonas Kaufmann, René Pape and Marina Poplavskaya share the stage? - MC

CLASSICAL

The composers' favourite pianist

When Pierre-Laurent Aimard gives the first of two piano recitals at the Southbank Centre, the hall will be packed, and not just because of his keyboard wizardry. At 54, he still has that aura of a miraculous child who has mesmerised a string of great composers. Olivier Messiaen spotted him as a precocious student at the Paris Conservatoire when he was 12, and made him his adoptive son; when he was 19, Pierre Boulez invited him to co-found his celebrated Ensemble Intercontemporain; Gyorgy Ligeti made him the test pilot for his horrendously difficult études; Elliott Carter, centenarian doyen of American composers, is still writing for him today.

But Aimard is always up to tricks, whether clowning around with Alfred Brendel (another admirer), or inserting outlandish bits of modernism in Bach performances, or sharing the stage with a bunch of Pygmy drummers to prove that the European avant-garde has no monopoly on complex metrical sophistication. It sounds like a joke that one of the works in his first recital should be a musical evocation of an Easter Island ceremony by the Italian composer Marco Stroppa, but this is just another facet of his campaign to get us to listen with new ears to the old music of Ravel, Bartok and Liszt which fills the rest of the programme. He spreads his gospel through the festivals he runs – Aldeburgh being one – and draws his strength from Zen, which he calls his "secret garden'.

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *Palais de la Musique et des Congrès, Strasbourg, October 20th, Schloss Elmau, Oberbayern, November 1st, Southbank, London, November 8th and December 7th*

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SPORT

In the long run

Ultra – extreme distance trail running – is so taxing that many competitors don't show up. **Todd Pitock** meets its leading exponent

BEFORE 4AM ON August 20th, Ryan Sandes slipped on a pair of trail-running shoes, red as Dorothy's on the way to Oz, and joined 624 other people waiting to start the 2011 Leadville Trail 100 Run in the Colorado Rockies. He knew what the rest of the day held: long trails, long climbs, precipitous descents, cold skin, internal overheating, muscle spasms, cramps, nausea, exhaustion and raw, throbbing pain.

"It's important to be positive about the experience," Sandes told me before the race. "There are times when you're running and just feel at peace with the world, you're all chilled out, and you can enjoy the challenge. I mean, you're the one who chose to do it." He acknowledged that there are also times when the agony hunts down the ecstasy, and "you want the world to open up and just swallow you."

Sandes's sport is ultramarathon running, or ultra. Pain is its defining characteristic. "They say that pain is weakness leaving the body," the race medical director, Dr John Hill, told the runners. "Some of you will have a lot of that leave tomorrow."

Sandes, a 29-year-old from Cape Town, is unusual in being good at this sport in his 20s. "Ultra was always something older guys ran," he said, "because mentally it was tough to keep on going. I don't think you can teach yourself to go beyond the pain barrier. You're either born with it and have the attitude about staying positive. I know guys who go to 'head coaches', but I don't know, someone else telling you that you can do it doesn't work for me."

To register for the 100-mile race, runners had to shell out at least $250; 803 people did this, but 178 of them didn't show up. Sandes, too, was nervous. He had never run more than 62 miles in a single race before. The field included figures who were well known in the ultra community, and when the experts handicapped the race, his name wasn't mentioned.

The runners set off in the dark, wearing headlamps. When a shotgun blast sent the pack charging, they looked, from a distance, like a plague of fireflies whizzing through the forest. Most of them just hoped to go the distance within the 30-hour time limit, but Sandes was different. He intended to win, as he had in five of his first seven ultra events.

He is the only person to win all of the Four Deserts Series, the grand slam of ultra – 150-mile races over seven days in some of the world's most forbidding places, including Antarctica, the Gobi desert in China, the Sahara in Egypt and the Atacama in Chile. The pace for each is a marathon a day, except for a middle-stage ultra of 100 kilometres (62 miles). Participants carry everything they need on their backs, except water. Only 81 people have completed all four runs.

It wasn't the prospect of extreme running that got Sandes into the sport. "It's been a way for me to see new places," he said. He only began running four years

"There are times when you're running and just feel at peace with the world"

World No. 1
Ryan Sandes, the only person to do the grand slam of the Four Deserts series, runs in Antarctica. He took up running four years ago

ago, when a group of friends invited him to try a half-marathon with them. The list for the half was closed, so he agreed to do the full marathon. He was not, it turned out, a great marathoner. Light and slight, at 5ft 10in and 10 stone, he preferred running trails to roads, and at 26.2 miles, he was just getting started.

In the world of ultras, distance is only part of the battle, and none of the races Sandes competed in was especially long. The TransEurope-Footrace is 2,600 miles, with 64 stages that take place from August to October. There are races in Nepal and Namibia, Mont Blanc and the Sierra Madre. Every race has its special challenges. The Jungle [ultra] Marathon in the Brazilian Amazon features drenching humidity, jaguars, piranhas, large carnivorous snakes and deadly microscopic creatures called carneros.

Ultra running gets hardly any attention from the mainstream sports media, but participation has been growing by leaps and bounds. Leadville began with 45 runners in 1983. In 2010 its list of 850 – a limit set by the United States Forest Service – filled up in June; this year it filled up by February. The lack of attention is just fine with many runners, who would like it to stay that way. Others want to see it become more professional, and, Sandes, who makes a living from corporate sponsorship, is one of them.

It's hard to know whether it could be bigger. A race this long is not easy to watch: for a spectator, the best spots are at the depots, where runners can refuel and are weighed to make sure they're sufficiently hydrated. The misery etched in some of their faces can make these seem less like aid stations than Stations of the Cross. And although some of the runners have built up a following, most of the spectators are there to cheer on friends and relatives, or hope they don't hurt themselves too badly.

For many extreme-trail runners it's all about personal and physical transformation, and they come in many shapes and sizes. I met some who used to be morbidly obese, and heard of another who had been a drug >

ZANDY-MANGOLD, RACING THE PLANET LTD

> addict. For some, running contains truths that others seek in holy books. The challenge, and the joy of making it to the end, is what they do it for: complete Leadville and you get a belt buckle. Win it, and you also get a miniature model of a mining cart filled with rocks.

Every runner has a game plan, and many have a support crew. The game plan details where they expect to be and what the crew should have ready for them. At the 50th mile, they can pick up pacers, fellow runners who volunteer to run alongside for company and encouragement.

Sandes chose Leadville because it was iconic, the largest of three American majors. It started as a desperate attempt to raise money after the molybdenum mine that employed nearly the entire town shut down. It's not Leadville's length that's mind-boggling so much as the actual route. At the 45th mile, runners ascend Hope Pass, climbing from 9,200 feet to 12,600. On the other side, they have to navigate a descent that would require ropes and clips if it were any more technical.

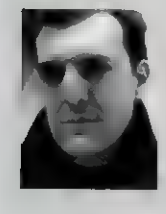
If you get that far, you're halfway. And then the race gets difficult. "On the way out it kind of brutalises you," Ken Chlouber, the founder, told me. "On the way back it kills you. But nobody has actually died – yet." Chlouber is 72 with a physique more like a 40-year-old's. ("And I work goddamn hard at it!" he said, as he wolfed down a breakfast of five eggs in Leadville.) He last ran the race in 2009, but only made it to the 44-mile mark.

That was about where Sandes made his move, passing four racers immediately ahead and finding the leader looking half-dead at the halfway point. He had planned to run according to his watch and how well his body was holding up, but he was chary of how he would do after the 62nd mile, his terra incognita. Even so, his gut told him to push the pace.

The 78th mile marked another ascent of 2,000 feet. By then Sandes's lead was 20 minutes, and the challenge turned to simple survival. His quadriceps felt as if they'd been shredded and wrapped too tightly back together. "Just run your race," he thought, "and don't do anything stupid and blow yourself up."

But as he heard the cheers on Leadville's main avenue, his race across the sky had elevated him to a new plateau. His time of 16:46 – 16 hours, 46 minutes – was the third-fastest in the race's history. The margin of victory was 32 minutes. When a second shotgun blast ended the race at 10am the next day, only just over half the starters had managed to cross the finish line.

Sandes winced just getting up on the winner's podium. "It's mind over matter," he said. "In the end it's about how much will you have." ■



Tom Standage

A game, a gadget and an app

A telescope that looks like a penguin, and a whale of a time slicing fruit

A GAME FRUIT NINJA

Slicing fruit as it flies through the air does not sound like the basis of a compelling video game. But somehow "Fruit Ninja" keeps pulling you in for one more round. Maybe it's the escapism of doing something that would be horribly messy in real life; or the finely tuned balance of risk (avoid slicing the bombs) and reward (slice the bananas or an occasional pomegranate to rack up a bonus score). "Fruit Ninja" was devised specifically for touch-screens, which let you slice and dice with just a swipe of your finger. Each round lasts a minute or two, just right for waiting for a train. It's been around since last year, and has been downloaded over 25m times. But the newest incarnation is the best yet: a download for the Xbox 360 Kinect which lets you act out your ninja fantasies in real life. All you have to do is wave your arms in front of the Kinect's camera to chop and slash the passing fruit. When the Kinect first appeared, it felt more like a tech demo than a finished product. But "Fruit Ninja Kinect" is so simple, stupid and enjoyable that it's hard to resist. And playing it may even count as exercise.

Fruit Ninja for iPhone, iPod Touch: £0.69. For iPad: £1.99. On Android Market: free. "Fruit Ninja Kinect": available on Xbox Live Marketplace for 800 Microsoft points (£6.80/€9.30)

GETTY

A GADGET INFINITY 76P

If you have ever wanted to buy a telescope for an astronomically inclined child, or even for yourself, but have been put off by the complexity of doing so, the Infinity 76P is for you. It resembles a blue plastic vase more than a telescope, with fins down its sides; put in the eyepiece and stand it up on its tray-like support, and it looks like a one-eyed penguin. But don't let its looks fool you. It's a brilliant first telescope for both terrestrial and astronomical use. With its three-inch mirror and 30x eyepiece, it easily shows the largest moons of Jupiter, the rings and largest moon of Saturn, the fine detail of craters on the moon and the beauty of star clusters such as the Pleiades. It can be set up in seconds, so you'll actually use it. And its tabletop design makes it easy for children to take turns peering into it, once they've learnt to look through a telescope without touching it.

Infinity 76P telescope: about £45

AN APP GEOCACHING

Geocaching arrived about a decade ago, when GPS satellite-positioning technology became cheap enough to catch on. Enthusiasts have hidden tiny caches all over the world and posted their co-ordinates on the internet. Searchers then type the co-ordinates into a GPS unit and try to find them. Sometimes clues, puzzles and more elaborate twists are added. And now smartphone apps make this game easier to play than ever. The best app is Geocaching, which links to the database of caches on geocaching.com. Wherever you are, you can call up a map of nearby caches. Pick one, and your phone then turns into a satellite compass that helps you find it. It sounds crazy, but it turns a day in a new city, or a walk in the woods, into a treasure hunt. The latest version, now available for Android and Windows handsets as well as the iPhone, lets you store the co-ordinates of caches in advance, to avoid roaming charges when abroad.

Geocaching app for iPhone: £6.99. For Android and Windows Phone 7: £6.36/$9.99

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Dorothy Fraser Harper, Ontario

FOOD

Through the isinglass

The best-known of all British cookbooks is 150 years old – and full of surprises. To celebrate, **Christopher Hirst** took a culinary tour around some of Mrs Beeton's tastier oddities

Isabella Beeton may have died in 1865, but through numerous posthumous editions of her huge, and hugely popular "Book of Household Managment", she gained a fame that continues to this day. What set her book apart was its clarity and scope. Containing 1,700 recipes, including 76 soups, 97 sauces and 109 puddings, and much more on topics ranging from dusting to blood-letting, it aimed to turn the reader into a 19th-century domestic goddess.

The ambitious scale of the work explains the famous confessional introduction: "I must frankly own, that if I had known, beforehand, that this book would have cost me the labour which it has, I should never have been courageous enough to commence it." Beeton was only 25 when the book came out in 1861; she died four years later from puerperal fever contracted during the birth of her fourth child. Like many of today's cookbooks, the recipes in "Household Management" vary from the wildly aspirational to the parsimonious. Turtle soup ("to make...with less difficulty cut off the head of the turtle the preceding day") would have been an unlikely dish among her neighbours in Pinner, near London, while turnip soup, based on "nine turnips, four onions, two quarts of stock", would have found few takers.

Beeton was a hard-pressed journalist rather than a practised cook: her biographer, Kathryn Hughes, says there is no evidence "that Isabella was interested in cooking". Compiled under pressure of deadline, the recipes were shamelessly purloined from other cookbooks. Beeton's claim in advertisements for the book that every recipe was tested seems doubtful, judging by her odder instructions. She maintains that large carrots should be boiled for 1¾ to 2¼ hours and macaroni for 1½ to 1¾ hours. Oddly, her recipe for haricot mutton contains no haricot beans, and she suggests that Brussels sprouts "may be arranged on the dish in the form of a pineapple".

On the plus side, "Household Management" is punctuated with background information about food. We learn that black turkey "approaches nearest to the original stock and is esteemed the best". Beeton's advice on fresh-cooked lobster could scarcely be bettered for precision. It should have "a stiffness in the tail which, if gently raised, will return with a spring". Current culinary opinion has come back to her view on butter, "nutritious and...far more easily digested than any other of the oleaginous substances sometimes used in its place". And the book as a whole provides a magnificent panorama of food in the middle of the 19th century. Along with items that have remained mainstays of British cuisine – rib of beef, pork pie, Welsh rarebit and bread-and-butter pudding ("better for being made about two hours before it is baked") – there are numerous other recipes that have been forgotten.

My exploration of these produced several dishes that could happily return to dining tables both domestic and commercial. No.1089 Asparagus Pudding (A Delicious Dish) sounded worth a try. It is an egg-and-flour batter with asparagus "peas" – little snippets of asparagus spear. Steamed in a tightly covered basin for two hours, it turned out as a domed, soufflé-like pudding. After obeying Beeton's strict directions for serving with melted butter ("*round* but not over the

pudding"), I found it light, delicate and deliciously infused with asparagus – though today we would be more likely to have it with a salad than "served with the second course".

No.1158 Baked Tomatoes (Excellent) lived up to the description. It is merely a deep dish of seasoned sliced tomatoes – much depends on their quality – baked for 20 minutes with a topping of breadcrumbs and molten butter. The crunchy top adds body and interest to the tomatoes. Beeton's description, "an exceedingly nice accompaniment to all kinds of roast meat", suggests she actually tried this one, maybe more than once. It has been repeated three times in my house.

No.127 Cucumber Soup involves quartering, deseeding, slicing thinly, salting "to draw the water from them" (Beeton omits the vital rinsing to remove the salt and subsequent drying), then warming with butter. After 40 minutes' simmering in stock, the result was a tasty, pale yellow soup with crescent moons of meltingly soft cucumber. The lovely texture would have been lost if this Victorian treat had been subjected to the modern habit of using a blender.

No.1408 Blanc-mange (A Supper Dish) will be a revelation for anyone with childhood memories of the luridly coloured version based on cornflour. It is, however, more demanding to make. Beeton's recipe demands isinglass (made from the air-bladders of fish); I substituted gelatine. Incorporating lemon-infused milk and pounded almonds, the recipe involves repeated heating, stirring and straining. I liked Beeton's suggestion that "any favourite liqueur...very much enhances the flavour of this always favourite dish". I went for Cointreau. When cold, the infusion is poured into an oiled mould. A few hours later, you are tasting authentic Victorian blancmange. With its delicate tinges of citrus and almonds, it knocks panna-cotta into a cocked hat.

Following this triumph, I decided to brave No.1439 Jaunemange, which shows every sign of being a Victorian joke. If blancmange is white, then it follows that a sibling made yellow with egg yolks will be jaunemange. This curiosity also requires gelatine (for isinglass), white wine and lemon juice. Again, Beeton's instructions are redolent of a sergeant-major: "Keep stirring the mixture *one way* until it thickens, *but do not allow to boil*; then...keep stirring until nearly cold". After an hour's stirring one way, the mixture was still liquid, but it set in the fridge. I thought the result was pleasantly tangy, a bit like lemon curd, though my wife was not persuaded. "If someone gave it to me," she said, "I'd think it was very weird." We didn't make it again. ■

Tim Atkin

The wine-list inspector

We raise a glass to Britain's chef of the year – and two of her female competitors

Ask a stew of British restaurant critics to name the best female chef in the country and most would choose Angela Hartnett. Hartnett was a protégée of Gordon Ramsay, working at Aubergine and The Connaught in London, before opening her own Michelin-starred restaurant, Murano, in 2008. Still in her early 40s, she was recently named chef of the year in the "Good Food Guide 2012".

Hartnett's aim is to fashion "modern cuisine with an Italian accent", reflecting her upbringing. But anyone expecting to eat the sort of thing served at, say, Zafferano in Belgravia will be surprised. There are nods towards Italy, but the food owes more to classic French techniques and flavours.

The dishes are certainly accomplished, but the wine list is more radical. Assembled by a French sommelier, Marc-Andréa Lévy, the 400 bins don't include a single bottle from the New World. Instead, the focus is on France and Italy, with bits and pieces from Spain and Portugal.

If this sounds conservative, it shouldn't. Lévy has a penchant for biodynamic and "natural" wines (made without sulphur), as well as for lesser-known areas such as the Marche, Sardinia, Corsica and Savoie. Such off-the-wall wines can be hit and miss, but here the selection is first rate.

The list is arranged by country and region. There are tasting notes for the mineral waters – including one whose "medicinal virtues" prevent gout – but not for the wines. Fortunately, Lévy is very good at describing aromas and flavours, as well as at matching Hartnett's delicate food, often with daring pairings.

Prices are fair for a Mayfair restaurant. If you avoid expense-account elephant traps like the 2000 Château Pavie at £1,000, you can drink well for less than £70. My advice, however, would be to choose a few of the 40-odd wines by the glass, collectively one of the most interesting line-ups I've come across.

With our three-course meal, we drank only French wines: the mineraly, bone dry 2007 Josmeyer Alsace Grand Cru Hengst Riesling; the structured white 2009 Comte Abbatucci Corsican Vin de Table, made from the rare Barbarossa grape, and a spicy, complex, blended Provençal white (2007 Le Grand Blanc, Vin de Table). This was followed by a gentle Merlot-based claret (2007 Château Le Puy, Côtes de Francs), the mature, sun-kissed 2003 Clos Milan, Les Baux de Provence, and two heavenly sweet wines: the beeswaxy 2010 Grain de Folie, Gaillac Doux, and the refreshing, apricotty 2004 Domaine de Souch Jurançon.

You can see why there is no room for New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or Chilean Merlot on a list like that. It's a challenging and highly unusual selection, but all credit to Lévy for his audacity. It makes Murano an even better restaurant.

£100pp for three courses and wine; muranolondon.com

AND THE COMPETITION...

The Modern Pantry, Anna Hansen's Clerkenwell eaterie, is all about flavoursome food in a relaxed atmosphere. The list includes a few choices from her native New Zealand, but is very much an international selection. The notes on individual wines, helpfully divided by style ("zesty and refreshing", "rich and powerful" and so on), are informative and well-written and the prices appealing: there are at least ten wines under £25 I'd happily order.

Over at **The Connaught**, Hélène Darroze cooks stylish, yet classic French food. The medium-sized wine list has a strong Gallic accent, with notable strengths in Burgundy, Bordeaux, Champagne, the Loire, the Rhône and the south-west – suitably, as Darroze was born in Landes. But there are well-chosen wines from other countries too, especially Italy. The by-the-glass selection is eclectic and reasonably priced and it's good to see a top restaurant listing so many half bottles.

the-connaught.co.uk/london_restaurant.aspx; themodernpantry.co.uk

ILLUSTRATION **CHRIS PRICE**

FOOD: STOVE NOTES

Thick or thin

Students of the world, wake up: your bedsit spag bol would be so much better if it were a tag bol instead. **Simon Hopkinson** explains why

ANY PASTA DISH should be all about the pasta. A dish of thin strands of finest fettuccine, simply dressed with fabulously pale Italian butter and Parmesan cheese, depends upon its pasta base to balance the rich additions. The rigidly simple recipe for *spaghetti aglio, olio e peperoncino* (garlic, olive oil and dried chilli) transforms those basic worms of dough into...well, one of the best meals ever, at least for me. The trick is, as always, not to overdo things.

One of the most famous – if not the most famous – overdone things, pasta-wise, is *spaghetti alla Bolognese*. To stay true to its roots in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy, it should be called *tagliatelle al ragù Bolognese*; nonetheless, British-speaking cooks continue to refer to it jocularly as "spag bol", and will no doubt do so for ever more. The pedant in me rather dislikes this trashy nomenclature, with its overtones of student bedsit, soggy spaghetti and greyish piles of mince; but it does make people smile.

"Spag" notwithstanding, the fact is that pairing a ribbon pasta such as tagliatelle with a meat-based sauce makes more sense. Tagliatelle's flat planes will hold the meat far better than the thin, rounded contours of slippery spaghetti; simply, the sauce falls off. As for the "bol", or *ragù*, it needs to be carefully made, slowly cooked and emphatically seasoned; but it must never dominate the pasta.

A carefully cooked *ragù* can, I think, be made from almost any meat – but not from a leftover roast. If you chop up and reheat previously cooked meat it turns to pap; and anyway, raw meat juices are essential to a fine *ragù*. You can use game, though: one of the best *ragùs* I ever ate was made by an American friend of mine, from a pair of particularly ripe mallards. The flesh was removed from the bones – a smelly business – coarsely minced, skin and all, then cooked for about three hours with aromatic herbs, finely chopped vegetables and red wine. The result was an astonishingly savoury, deeply dark brew, served with pappardelle.

I also enjoy a more delicate meat sauce, like this "bol" made with minced veal. I rarely tamper with the basics, and always begin in the same manner: finely chopping a large onion, two to three peeled sticks of celery, a large carrot and a little garlic, then stewing them in butter – use olive oil, if you must, but in north Italy it is almost always butter – until softened. After that I add minced veal, allowing it to lightly gild, before pouring in a glass or two of white wine, a similar amount of good stock, and a couple of fresh, large ripe tomatoes, skinned and chopped. I then allow the mixture to very quietly reduce, for about an hour, by which time almost all liquid has been driven off.

Then I add a glassful of full-cream milk and reduce it very gently until it's rich and unctuous; the milk will separate into curds and whey, but will be absorbed by the meat juices and moisture from the tomatoes. Now is the moment to add chopped herbs: many basil leaves; less of marjoram or oregano; a touch of rosemary; lots of parsley. (I wouldn't advise using all of these at once, but basil and parsley marry well in summer.) I often like to add a few finely chopped salted anchovies, which melt into the *ragù* as an interesting seasoning, along with plenty of freshly ground pepper and a little finely grated lemon zest for fragrance.

I'll let this stew for a further 20 minutes, while turning to the pasta. After boiling the pasta in salted water until *al dente* – the timings on the packet are usually accurate, especially if it's a fine quality pasta – briefly drain through a colander into a serving bowl to heat it, discard the water, tip the drained pasta into the hot bowl and gently mix with the *ragù*. Serve directly from the bowl with freshly grated Parmesan handed at table.

Whether you think the finished *ragù* looks like a mess is neither here nor there. Once assembled, any worries about presentation will be smothered by the whole point of the dish: the pasta. And it will taste very good. ■

SHOPPING LIST

Pasta Use the finest dried egg pasta you can find. Italians never use fresh pasta: it flops down and never has the robustness necessary to hold its own against the *ragù*. My absolute favourite is Cipriani's *extra sottili* (extra thin) pasta, with De Cecco as runner up. In Britain the latter is more easily available, but it really is worth seeking out the former: you can find it in specialist shops and Italian delis, or order online via something-italian.com.

Veal About 500g is plenty to dress enough pasta for four servings; ask your butcher for a cheap cut, such as "pie veal", and save time by getting them to mince it for you. - SH

ILLUSTRATION **CATH RILEY**

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CARS

Little big cars

Luxury now comes in smaller packages. **Paul Markillie** tries one out

A LUXURY CAR has nearly always meant a big car. As David Bowie sings in "Golden Years", you make a statement driving back to "where you once belonged/ in the back of a dream car 20 feet long". But these are straitened and greener times. Even if you can afford a stretch Cadillac, it becomes a lot more ostentatious when all around you are downsizing.

So I don't feel too flash settling into the Oxford-leather seats of a Range Rover Evoque and heading for Liverpool – with all 17 speakers of its top-notch Meridian sound system providing the musical accompaniment. The Range Rover is a large posh car; an Evoque is the new baby version, about 61cm (2 foot) shorter and 24cm lower. It is part of a trend, as Europe's manufacturers of prestige vehicles build smaller versions of their luxurious models.

I am taking this particular Evoque, a top-of-the-range £44,000 version, back where it came from: the Halewood factory on Merseyside, which seemed ready for the chop a few years ago when it was owned >

ILLUSTRATION **NICK HARDCASTLE**

> by Ford. Now, in the hands of the Tata Group, the Indian owner of Land Rover, Halewood has turned into one of the most advanced car plants in Europe, and the Evoque is something of a local hero, credited with doubling the Halewood workforce to more than 3,000.

Land Rover's confidence is not misplaced: that much is clear within a mile or so. Inside, the Evoque has the classy feel of its bigger brother. It goes smartly, with a four-cylinder two-litre turbocharged petrol engine (instead of a 5-litre v8 in the latest £86,000 Range Rover, the mysteriously named Autobiography). I prefer it to the two diesel-powered versions, the cheaper and less thirsty of which is a two-wheel-drive model, from £27,995, that claims to have a combined fuel consumption of better than 4.5 litres per 100km (60mpg).

The Evoque is striking, in a more streetwise way, than the bigger Range Rover, which still looks more at home out in the sticks than in town

A modest Range Rover indeed, and a sure-footed one – at least with four-wheel drive. Going up and down tracks across Welsh mountains showed that, not to mention an abandoned and flooded railway tunnel leading to Liverpool Lime Street station. Even though most owners will hardly get the tyres muddy, Land Rover likes to use adventurous routes to prove that its cars have real off-road ability. The Evoque, though good at this stuff, will not cope with such extremes as a big Range Rover can.

The Evoque is striking, in a more streetwise way, than the bigger Range Rover, which still looks more at home out in the sticks than in town. The main difference is the roof, which slopes steeply towards the rear. In coupé form, it gives the Evoque a sleekness. The effect is less dramatic in the five-door version as the roof slopes a little less, but that does provide passengers in the rear with a bit more space.

In the end, space is the deciding factor with little big cars, because quarts into pint pots (or 1.1 litres into 0.6) will not go. Dogs, children and luggage disappear more easily into bigger vehicles. And space itself is a luxury. One of the things people like about a big Range Rover is the commanding driver's position: sitting up high and looking over those stuck in smaller cars.

If you can live without a regal driving position, some of the plushness and brand values of luxury cars are to be found in the smaller versions. The idea is not new: the Mercedes-Benz A-Class was launched in 1997. Newer models with more features are now available or in the works (*see below*). So far, the oddest is a small Aston Martin called the Cygnet. The car itself is a little Toyota iQ, a clever runaround with a 1.3-litre engine but expensive at £12,000. All the Aston Martin craftsmen do is add lots of hand-stitched leather and top-class paintwork, put one of their badges on the front and sell it for more than £30,000. Those who still have money to burn may prefer to pay £40,000 for a limited edition by the Paris fashion house colette, which adds its own touches – including scatter cushions. I find it hard to take this car seriously, although apparently it has plenty of customers, many with a real Aston in the garage.

The carmakers are going to need plenty of customers for these cars. EU regulations say that they must reduce CO_2 emissions or risk fines that could amount to several thousand euros on each vehicle sold, and America has a similar policy. The targets each manufacturer has to meet are an average across their range, so companies making luxury and performance cars will need some small fry in their line-up if they want to continue making dream cars for those who would not be seen in anything small. ■

A LITTLE LUXURY

Range Rover Evoque
Stylish and with lots of extras – which can take the starting price of £27,995 to £44,000

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THINKING

Crowds R Us

After this summer's riots in England, crowd behaviour got a kicking. **Ian Leslie** argues that it was undeserved

SHORTLY AFTER THE popular uprising that led to the establishment of the Paris Commune in 1871, the politician Georges Clemenceau recalled witnessing a riot: "Suddenly a terrific noise broke out, and the mob which filled the courtyard burst into the street in the grip of some kind of frenzy…All were shrieking like wild beasts without realising what they were doing." For those who followed the English riots of 2011, the terms are familiar. On television, in newspapers and comment threads, the rioters were repeatedly likened to animals in the grip of a primitive frenzy, induced not by drink or drugs but by another culprit: the crowd.

Crowds, we are often told, are dumb. They obliterate reason, sentience and accountability, turning individuals into helpless copycats. Commentators on the riots offered different explanations but most agreed that crowd psychology was part of the problem. "The dominant trait of the crowd is to reduce its myriad individuals to a single, dysfunctional persona," wrote the novelist Will Self in the *New Statesman*. "The crowd is stupider than the averaging of its component minds." The violence was said to have spread like a "contagion" through the crowd, facilitated by social media. For those who wanted to sound scientific, the term to drop was "deindividuation": the loss of identity and moral responsibility that can occur in a group. But do crowds really make us more stupid?

Earlier this year, the world watched a crowd bring down an autocratic government, by the simple act of coming together in one place, day after day, night after night. Egyptian protesters created a micro-society in Tahrir Square, organising garbage collection, defending themselves when they needed to, but otherwise ensuring the protest remained peaceful. As well as courage, this took intelligence, discipline and restraint. Few international observers accused the crowd in Tahrir Square of being dysfunctional, or of turning its members into animals. The Tahrir protesters also used social media, but rather than calling for a ban, as some in Britain did after the riots, people wrote eulogies to the liberating potential of Twitter. It seems that not all crowds are bad. But when bad things happen, the crowd gets the blame.

Consciously or otherwise, Self and others are echoing the French intellectual, and contemporary of Clemenceau, Gustave Le Bon. In 1896 Le Bon published the most influential book ever written about crowds, "The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind". "By the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd," Le Bon argued, "a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian." Le Bon was the Malcolm Gladwell of his day, a populariser of scientific thought with an acute feel for the Zeitgeist. His equivalent of Gladwell's "tipping point" was "the law of the mental unity of crowds". It was a scientific-sounding articulation of an old idea: crowds have a mind of their own, under which individuality is submerged and rationality destroyed.

Le Bon's book hit a cultural nerve: a phrase of his, the "era of crowds", stuck to the late 19th century. Europe's cities had grown and industrialised fast, creating a vast and unruly class of people who had a nasty habit of coming together in public places to demand things. In Paris riots had threatened and sometimes overturned the established order for the last hundred years. Le Bon was a conservative, distrustful of fashionable democratic ideas. Like other members of the French middle class, when he saw a crowd he smelt only trouble. It's hardly surprising that he would characterise the people in them as sub-human.

What is surprising is that we seem to have inherited his prejudices. John Drury, a psychologist at Sussex university who studies crowd behaviour, believes that the idea that crowds induce irrational behaviour

Which is more typical? RIGHT A happy crowd watching college football at the University of Kansas, 1989. BELOW A menacing crowd in Toxteth, Liverpool, August 2011

REUTERS CORBIS

and erase individuality just isn't supported by the evidence. First, most crowds aren't violent. The crowd in the shopping mall or at a music festival is usually calm and ordered. Even crowds that include conflicting groups, as at football matches, are more likely to be peaceful than not. Second, even when crowds do turn violent, they aren't necessarily irrational. In the 18th century England was afflicted by food riots. If ever there was an atavistic reason to riot, that was surely it. But the historian E.P. Thompson showed that the riots took place not when food was at its most scarce but when people saw merchants selling grain at a steep profit; the rioters were motivated by a rational sense of injustice rather than the "animal" drive of hunger.

The Le Bon way of thinking about crowds matches the popular perception of crowd disasters, too – we tend to assume the worst of those involved. The people of Liverpool have spent years correcting the unfounded characterisation of those involved in the Hillsborough disaster as mindless thugs. In 1979, at a concert in Cincinnati headlined by The Who, 11 people were crushed to death as fans lined up to enter the stadium. The press described a "surging, primitive mob" comprised of "barbarians" and quoted a security guard who said, "These kids were acting like animals." But a subsequent study based on other eyewitness interviews found that, rather than engaging in a crazed stampede to get the best seats, crowd members had attempted to help each other escape the crush as soon as they realised it was happening. In fact, the problem in such situations is almost always one of physics, rather than morality; a little pushing can create shock waves that ripple through a crowd, exerting ferocious pressure on those unfortunate enough to be caught in the most tightly packed areas or up against a hard object, like the Who fans closest to the locked doors, or the Liverpool supporters nearest the barrier.

Even crowds that include conflicting groups are more likely to be peaceful than not

Crowds can change the way people behave. There is a difference between what you might call an accidental crowd, as in a railway station, and an organised crowd: people brought together by a shared purpose – supporting a team, overthrowing a despot. Being a part of such a crowd can lead you to do things you wouldn't normally do and might even disapprove of in normal circumstances: chant, swear at a referee, bellow the chorus to Robbie Williams's "Angels". But that's not to say that the persona you adopt in this context isn't "you" or that it's irrational to take part in crowd rituals (in a crowd of Barcelona supporters, the irrational thing to do would be to cheer on Real Madrid). When an accountant plays air guitar at a concert, he isn't giving up his identity so much as finding a neglected corner of it. Above all, he is enjoying the glorious sensation of feeling part of something bigger than himself.

An accidental crowd can become an organised one in response to an external threat. Passengers on the Piccadilly line who left King's Cross at 8.50am on July 7th 2005 would have felt little in common with each other, bar the tetchiness of the commuter. But when the carriage exploded and the survivors realised they had been attacked, they performed heroic acts to save the lives of strangers they had just been ignoring. The Tahrir Square crowd included supporters from Cairo's leading soccer teams, Al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek. The two groups have a longstanding post-match tradition of vicious fighting. Yet in Tahrir Square they stood together against Mubarak's thugs. Crowds are as likely to bring out the best in us as the worst. ■

Robert Butler *Going Green*

Every big scientific moment is also cultural. And going green is about much more than your lightbulbs

HALFWAY THROUGH BRECHT'S "Life of Galileo", there's a moment when a character called Little Monk tells the world's most bullish scientist why he should shut up about his latest discovery. The Little Priest tells Galileo about his parents, peasants in Campagna, who know a great deal about olive trees, and not much else. Life is harsh; his father's back is bent, his mother is exhausted from rearing children, but each day of their lives they have been heartened by the knowledge that God watches over them.

The Little Priest asks Galileo to think about how his parents would feel if he were to say that they lived on a lump of stone and that this stone twists through the universe around a star, and that this star is itself just one among countless other stars. All this may be true, the Little Priest says, but for his mum and dad, the discovery – to paraphrase – would be a real downer.

When "Life of Galileo" opened in Beverley Hills in 1947 with Charles Laughton in the lead, part of its power came from the knowledge that the scientific discovery at the forefront of the audience's mind was not the four moons of Jupiter, but the atomic bombs that had exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki two years before. This was as daunting a new fact as anything that the Campagnan peasants might have faced three centuries earlier.

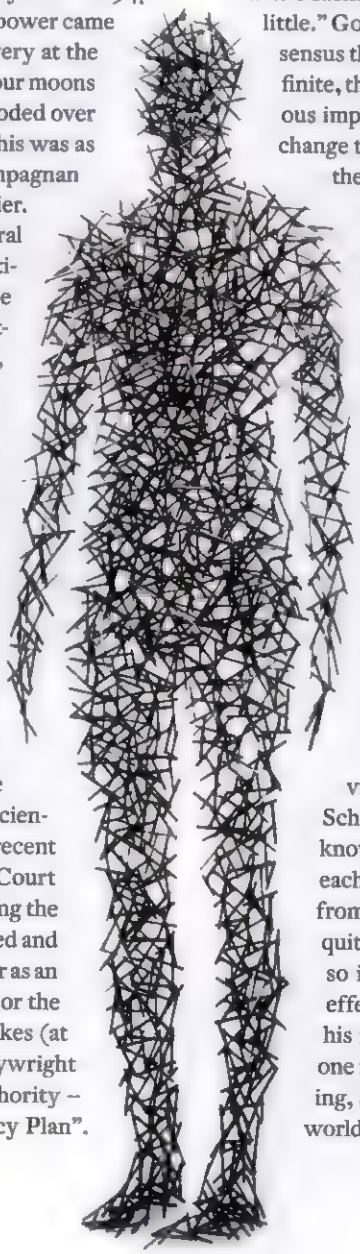
Every big scientific moment is also a cultural one. The Lisbon earthquake that killed an estimated 30,000 people in 1755 gave birth to the science of seismology. It also inspired writings by Kant, Rousseau and, most famously, Voltaire, who describes the earthquake in "Candide", and the impact it had on the notion that there was a benevolent God watching over "the best of all possible worlds". A century later, the ideas in Darwin's "Origin of Species" would be played out, absorbed and contested in the novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Fifty years after that, Einstein's Theory of Relativity paved the way for modernism in all the arts.

This process continues today. From the latest novel by Ian McEwan to a sculpture by Antony Gormley to a dance piece by Siobhan Davies, more and more artists are drawn to the issues that arise from the findings of climate scientists. Some of these artistic efforts, such as recent plays at the National Theatre and the Royal Court in London, have been merely topical, addressing the theme as if it is a subject that could be researched and digested in six months and then presented either as an earnest documentary drama (at the National) or the pretext for some very funny, if inaccurate, jokes (at the Royal Court). There has only been one playwright who has tackled the subject with wit and authority – Steve Waters, with his play "The Contingency Plan". He gave a sense that he had lived with these issues for years. But the best example so far of a work of art that has been inspired by climate science is Cormac McCarthy's novel "The Road". McCarthy listened hard to what climate scientists were telling him and then wrote a masterpiece that makes no direct mention of the subject. He didn't have to. As Seamus Heaney has remarked in another context, "environmental issues have to a large extent changed the mind of poetry".

This may be the moment, in my last Going Green column, to spell out this column's idea of going green. It is not first and foremost about changing to low-energy lightbulbs, driving a Prius, cutting back on flights, insulating your loft or growing vegetables on your roof. All these are worth doing, so long as you remember the words of the British government's chief scientific adviser, David Mackay – "If everyone does a little, we'll achieve only a little." Going green is more about absorbing the scientific consensus that has emerged over the last 50 years: resources are finite, the planet is fragile, our activities are having a dangerous impact on the atmosphere. To take this on board is to change the way you see the world. Even people who resent the sanctimonious tendencies of the greens can see that a great cultural shift has taken place; one that, in the opinion of Tim Smit, who founded the Eden Project in Cornwall, may turn out to be as far-reaching as the Renaissance or the Reformation.

Does that mean that art-lovers and theatre-goers are in for many more gloomy, doom-laden paintings and plays? Perhaps not. The response from artists is moving rapidly away from the clichés of collapsing icesheets and polar bears perched on lonely icebergs. More and more, playwrights, directors and artists talk about approaching this subject through ideas of resilience, survival, adaptation and improvisation. They want to move audiences through stories of hope, endurance and resourcefulness. And that takes us back to the beginnings of narrative art, to Homer and his hero, Odysseus the Cunning.

If sustainability is about one thing, it's survival. Probably the most famous story of all about survival appears in "One Thousand and One Nights". Scheherazade volunteers to marry King Shahryar knowing it is his custom to take a virgin in marriage each night and kill her the next morning. She survives from one night to the next by telling stories that never quite finish. It's her art that keeps her alive. But it does so in two ways. Night by night, story by story, she effects a change in the king's cruel heart, awakening his imagination and sympathy. After a thousand and one nights, the king reveals his love for her. By surviving, Scheherazade shows that art not only reflects the world, it changes it too. ■



DOMAIN ANTONY GORMLEY

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Offshore, the Penghu National Scenic Area is renowned for its geographic land formations. Awaken your imagination at the Qimei Double Heart Stone Fish Weir and the basalt formations in Dinggou Island. Back on the main island, explore Guishan Island (also known as Turtle Island) and go on a whale-watching expedition near underwater hot-spring vents.

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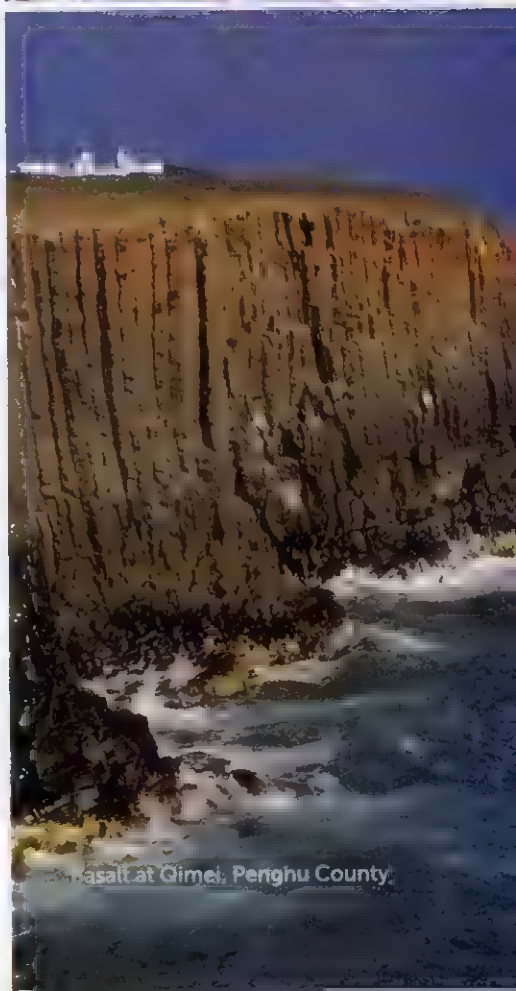


Basalt at Qimei, Penghu County

APPLIED FASHION

The many shades of black

Fashion's favourite colour is not a colour at all. Designers are addicted to it, as is our columnist **Rebecca Willis**. So we asked her to explain

TOWARDS THE END of the last century, a friend of mine took a taxi to London Fashion Week. The driver gawped in puzzlement at the moving sea of people dressed head-to-toe in black, and asked: "What's that, then? Some religious cult?"

He had a point. There is something bordering on the cultish in fashion's devotion to the colour black – it's the equivalent of white for Moonies or orange for Hare Krishnas. Since that taxi journey in the 1990s the wardrobes of the stylish have brightened up a bit, but although trends such as colour blocking or floral prints may float by on the surface current, underneath there is a deeper, darker tide that pulls us back towards black. Despite pronouncements at intervals by the fashion industry that red or pink or blue is the new black, the old black is still very much with us.

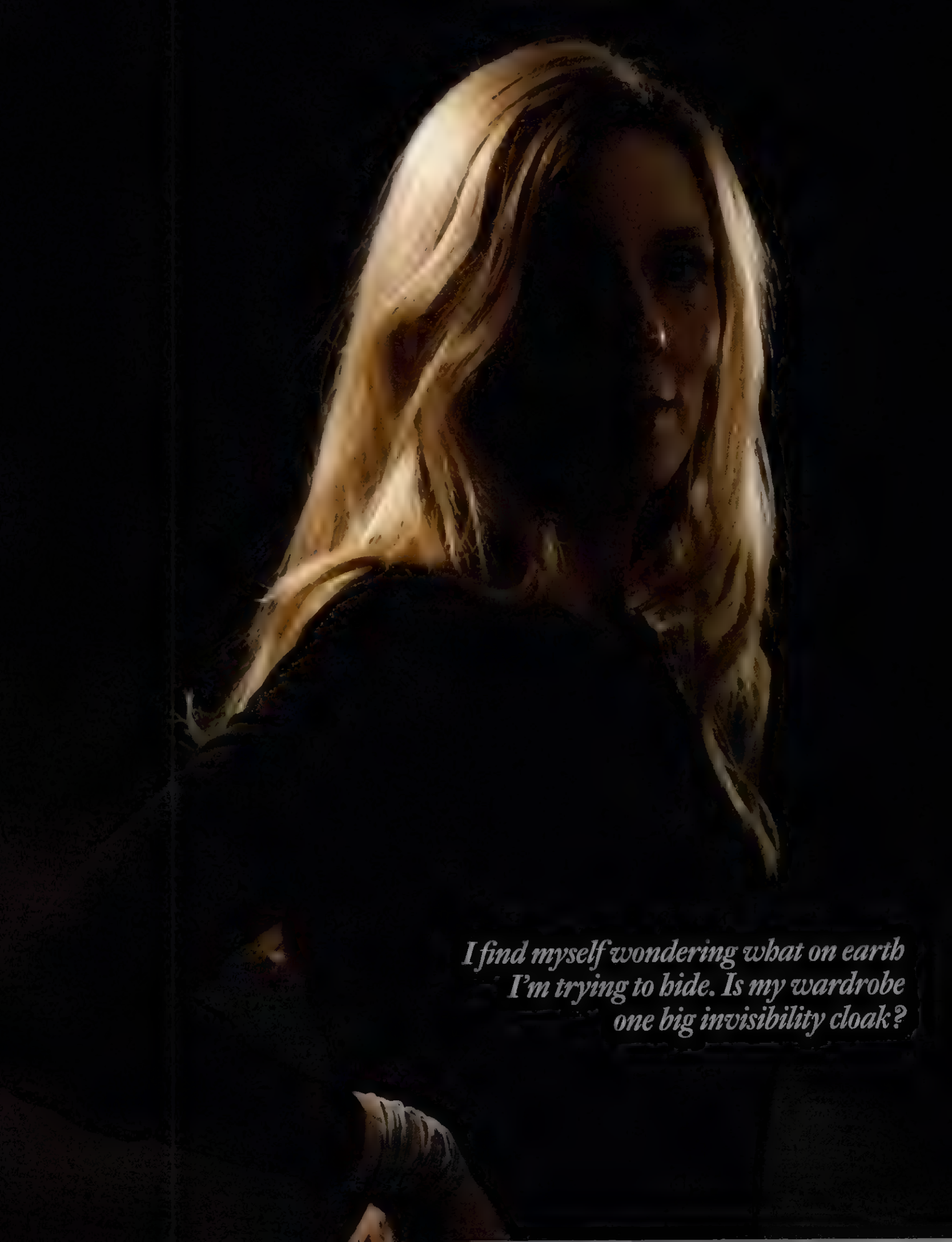
Visiting eBay, the auction website, confirms this. A search in "Clothes, Shoes and Accessories" for the word "black" yields more than 3m items – that's twice as many as "blue", and five or six times as many as "brown" or "grey". This ratio remains more or less the same in winter and summer, and when you narrow the search to "women's clothing". (Black also predominates in men's clothing, though there's slightly more blue.) A pedant might argue that these are the clothes that people are trying to get rid of – certainly if they were all thrown away we'd be left with a very large, black mountain. But the website of the upmarket fashion retailer Net-a-Porter tells the same story, with black significantly more dominant in its wares, be it January or June.

What is it about, this infatuation with black? It's a question I am often asked, since I wear black most of the time, and therefore one upon which I have spent much time reflecting. My friends and colleagues might say I wear little else, though it doesn't feel like that to me – I wear colours sometimes, particularly in summer, but black is what I feel most comfortable in. Putting on black in the morning feels as natural as breathing. If I enter a clothes shop, I am drawn towards the rails of black. I will happily wear black to weddings as well as funerals. I own black sandals and black sundresses. I even wore black when I was nine months pregnant in a July heatwave. This habit of mine is an adult-onset condition, which developed when I spent a dangerously long time working at British *Vogue* magazine; I didn't work in the fashion department, but I absorbed black osmotically. I know I'm far from alone in my preference for wearing black, so – for all those others who are asked why they wear so much black, as well as for myself – I'll try to answer that question here for once and for all.

To do that means asking some other questions about black's significance in our society generally. How is it that black can betoken both oppression (the Nazis and Fascists) and also the rebellion of youth (punks and goths)? How can it be the distinctive feature of religious garments (nuns, priests, Hassidic Jews), and also of rubber and bondage fetishists? Why is it the uniform of dons and anorexics alike, of waiters and witches, of judges and suicide-bombers? No colour performs so many duties, in so many fields of clothing – smart, casual, uniform, anti-uniform – as black does. It is uniquely versatile and flexible. How, exactly, does my friend and ally pull that off?

THE FIRST THING to know about black is that – although the OED defines it as "of the very darkest colour" – it is not, strictly speaking, a colour at all. Black absorbs all the visible frequencies of light, just as white reflects them all. It is not on the colour wheel; adding black to a colour changes its tone, not its hue. Nor will you find it in a traditional watercolour palette – watercolourists think that black is cheating and that colour can be perceived in everything; indeed, van Gogh noted that Frans Hals painted with 27 shades of black. Black is an absence, not a presence. That, I think, is the main reason it is so versatile and can have so many wildly different meanings projected on to it, both in our culture and in others.

PORTRAIT JILLIAN EDELSTEIN



I find myself wondering what on earth I'm trying to hide. Is my wardrobe one big invisibility cloak?

Does black make everyone look the same, like throngs of the damned circling in hell?

This absence-not-presence is surely why black is universally believed to be flattering, and why anyone who has ever fretted about their figure regards black as a friend. It's not as simple as the rule that says if you paint a room a dark colour it will seem smaller (and anyway, an architect friend told me that if you paint a very small room black it can seem bigger, because you lose track of where the space ends). It's more that black is flattening, as well as flattering. When I asked the late Liz Tilberis, then editor of British *Vogue*, why fashion loved black so much, she explained that "it gives you an outline, a silhouette". Colour and pattern, on the other hand, give you a surface – broken up, textured, contoured – that runs around the body and creates a visual sense of dimension. Black doesn't actually have magical powers, though – if the outline is bulgy, in theory black will emphasise that, whereas colour and pattern detract from it. It should therefore follow that slim people look better in black than chubby ones, but that is a subjective matter.

There are certainly a lot of practical reasons for choosing black. When I ask people why they wear it, the first response is usually "because it's easy". That seems to encompass several things. It doesn't show the dirt. It doesn't date. It goes with most colours, so it works as a good base to which other things can be added without meaning that you have to change handbags (eBay tally: twice as many black handbags as brown). Black also goes with other blacks (blacks can be different from each other, but not in the same way that different reds, say, or blues are; blacks can't "clash"); this means that if you are not an off-the-peg dress size and usually wear separates, life is simplified. And there's an economic point too: black can look smart even if it's cheap. In short, black is a sensible, voluntary uniform.

Betty Jackson is a designer who is associated with black – she wears little else, and her label for the British department store Debenhams is called Betty Jackson Black. I asked her to sum up its appeal. "It's a colour that has become associated with glamour rather than gloom," she says. "It works for most occasions on most skin and hair colours...It's simple and practical for work and always chic for a party." I couldn't agree more, but others are immune to its charms. An artist I know says "only boring people wear black." Colour is her stock in trade; for those otherwise employed, "doing" colour can be time-consuming and complex – there are too many variables. Even so it gives me pause. Is black the boring option? Has it just become the lazy shorthand for "stylish"? Is it dodging the whole issue of expressing oneself through what one chooses to wear? Worse, are black-wearers trying to hide something? Does black make us all look the same, like throngs of the damned circling in hell? Perhaps so. I get quite exercised thinking about it. But then Marie-Christine Brunin, who brought Zara's shops to Britain, tells me that she thinks that, far from making everyone look the same, black makes clothing recede and isolates the face, so emphasising our invididuality. Phew.

Talking of faces, let's take a look at the received wisdom that black is "draining", particularly as you get older. This widespread belief explains why older women often wear pastels and, if they wear black, accessorise it with a colourful silk scarf at the neck. It may be that, because it doesn't reflect light, black lacks some illuminating property that colours possess. But I think the whole axis of this debate is skewed: it's really about whether you choose a dramatic look or a soft one, not whether you look drained or, er, un-drained. Perhaps at root lies an age-old fear of the widow (and of death in general – of which more later) and society's inability through history to find a role for women after their reproductive years, to the point where they were at times cast as witches and killed. Young women in black exude a different threat to society – sexy, wanton, vampish (whereas white is considered pure and virginal). I have a strong suspicion that this "draining" business is a myth that has evolved to reinforce a complex set of prejudices in society.

It is impossible to consider black without putting it in the context of geography and climate. The credo that strong colours look best on dark skins has its foundation in the natural world. The powerful sunlight in the tropics, where skin needs to be dark for protection, creates bright cerulean skies, glittering jungle greens. In Nordic countries, where sunlight is scarce and human skin evolved to produce less melanin so that the body could create more vitamin D, the skies are a dull grey and blues are watery – colours an artist would call "cool". Black is there, too, in a deep, cold lake or a towering crag. So, in the same way that buildings traditionally harmonised with their landscape, because local soil would be mixed in with the whitewash they were painted in, there is a subtle interplay between clothing and surroundings – our perception of what "suits" us is based on our observation of the colour scheme in the world around us. This explains why, if I'm wearing colour on a summer's day and the sun goes behind a cloud, I suddenly feel like a macaw blown off-course from the Amazon. The corollary to colour looking best on dark skins is that black looks better on blondes (another *on dit*). Of course, as with all matters of fashion, a lot depends on the indi-

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY **SEAN GLEASON**
STYLIST **OLIVIA POMP**
Hair and make-up Nicky Tavilla Model Adriana Dancsi @ Elite

THIS PAGE: Leather jacket, £710, Zadig & Voltaire; legging jeans, £39.95, G-Star

THIS LEFT: Cashmere dress, £330, Erin Wasson for Zadig & Voltaire

Viscose dress, £69, Cos; opaque "Ultimate Magic" shapewear tights, £6, M&S; suede boots, £475, Diane von Furstenberg

OVERLEAF Belted coat, £449, ck by Calvin Klein; boots and tights, as before; skinny belt, £5, M&S

> vidual, but shocking pink, aubergine or electric blue can be far more draining to a fair complexion than poor old black.

I feel out of place, too, wearing black on a country walk, because black has become a distinctly urban uniform. It speaks of the city and the dirt and darkness of the industrial age – oil, smoke, tar. It has become, depending on your tribe, a signal that says slick, streetwise, businesslike, official. But long, long before this happened, black had already accumulated some serious baggage.

BLACK HAS ENORMOUS symbolic power. This is embedded in our language – with its black lists, black looks, black moods and black magic – and in other languages, too. The code is so established that in old cowboy movies the bad guy wore a black hat and the good guy had a white one; similarly in the chariot race in "Ben Hur", our hero's horses are white, while his evil opponent's horses are...you guessed it.

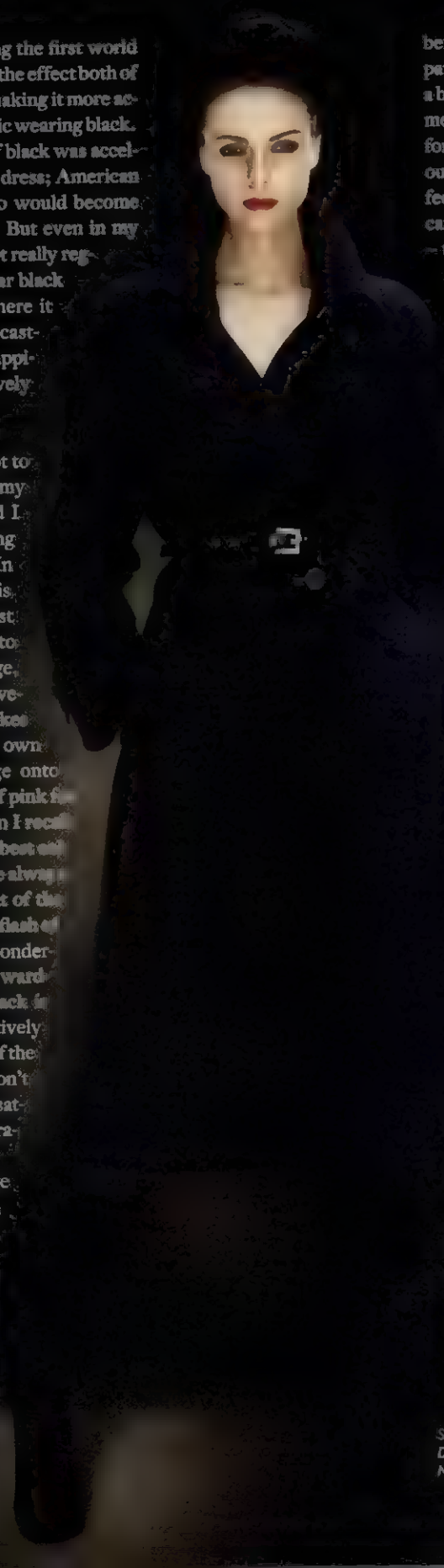
This symbolism has existed since the dawn of time; or rather, since just before it – the word "dawn" is telling. Darkness came first. Then the Big Bang – or God, or possibly both, according to taste – made light out of the darkness. Light is the life force and without it things will die. Just as birth is about light – leaving the womb, opening our eyes – so darkness is about death, a final closing of our eyes, a return to the earth. The association between black and death is part of our natural world. The human animal has a primeval fear of the dark, because it robs us of our sense of sight; the late novelist Bruce Chatwin tried to explain this by suggesting that we were preyed on by an unknown creature during the night. Whether he's right or not, we are mortally vulnerable in the dark. It is a short step to the equation of light and dark, of day and night, with good and evil, with God and the Devil. And that is how black and white took their places in the binary of morality, with black lined up squarely on Satan's side.

We wear white at christenings and weddings (beginnings) and black at funerals (endings). Black has been associated with mourning dress since at least Roman times. During the worst of the English civil war, it was common to see large outdoor cauldrons in which clothes were being dyed black for mourning. But it was Queen Victoria, who wore black from the death of her husband Albert in 1861 until the day she herself died in 1901, who generated the monumental cult of mourning that still casts its shadow today. For Victorian and Edwardian British women there were strict rules: if your husband died you wore full mourning for two years, whereas for an aunt you wore half-mourning – which allowed lavender and grey – for

When I'm wearing black I feel small, inconspicuous, neat and cool

three months. Things changed during the first world war, when the massive loss of life had the effect both of relaxing the rules of mourning, and making it more acceptable for women to appear in public wearing black.

In the 1920s, the rehabilitation of black was accelerated by Coco Chanel's little black dress; American *Vogue* said, presciently, that the LBD would become a "uniform for all women of taste". But even in my grandmother's day, black was still not really regarded as day-wear. Widows still wear black in rural Latin countries, but elsewhere it has been largely freed from its typecasting, and today legions of us are happiest wearing what was, until relatively recently, the colour of unhappiness.



FOR THE FINAL stage of my attempt to answer charges of blackaholism – my own and that of others – I decided I should go cold turkey. I begin by taking a long, hard look into my wardrobe. In there are colourful kaftans and bikinis for hot holidays, but otherwise most of my clothes are black, or bought to wear with black – grey, beige, greige, brown, soft green, dusty blue and every shade of khaki. It suddenly strikes me that the palette of "colours" I own could be used to paint camouflage onto army vehicles. There's the odd bit of pink for summer, I console myself – but then I recall reading somewhere that pink is the best colour for camouflage in the desert. I've always thought of my colour palette as that of the English seaside, but in that lightning flash of self-awareness even I find myself wondering what I'm trying to hide. Is my wardrobe one big invisibility cloak? Black is an absence, remember. Am I effectively electing to wear a Western version of the hijab? In our looks-obsessed age, I don't think I'm more-than-averagely dissatisfied with my body, but this, a therapist might say, clearly needs work.

So I stride out in bright plumage and I feel as though I am speaking in a foreign language and unable to express myself properly. I start with a lilac-and-purple dip-dyed cashmere jumper, which I'm told resembles an ice-lolly, then I try a shocking pink one, in both cases over safe black trousers. But before long I've plucked up courage to go the whole way: a patterned silk dress in distinctly non-military greens with a bit of turquoise thrown in. Several people, smiling, comment on what I'm wearing; perhaps they are just grateful for the change, but it seems to make them happy to see colour. Even the builder working at our house notices. But I feel large, conspicuous, untidy and frumpy. From which I can only infer – self-knowledge being an imperfect science – that when I'm wearing black I feel the opposite: small, inconspicuous, neat and cool. I'm not going to take you on a journey into the dark recesses of my psyche to explore the whys and wherefores of that, but I recognise it's true. I also know that it's not the whole truth.

One immediate effect of wearing colour is accessories panic. My favourite bag and most of my footwear is black, and looks too stark and heavy with some colours. But changing handbags is tedious and time-consuming. If my entire wardrobe is determined by my favourite bag, the tail is wagging the dog – but it's also an acknowledgment that time is precious. I've noticed that lots of women who work in fashion, whilst showing the public the vast range of this season's latest offerings, opt themselves for one look – usually involving black – and then stick to it.

That approach may lead to a uniform that looks boring to the non-practitioner. It may seem lazy, but one person's laziness is another's simplicity. Women have an absolute right not to waste time over the self-regarding matter of what to wear, and to get on with other aspects of their lives if they so choose. It is significant that another thing that I feel wearing colour is uncomfortably girly. In our culture men, not traditionally judged by appearances in the same way as women, have a narrower range of options about what they wear. Why should women begin every day by questioning what they are going to put on, and by extension, themselves? Maybe wearing black expresses a kind of penis envy – a covetousness of the role that society allows men and a protest against the pressure to look decorative. I for one would not mourn the passing of that pressure, and wearing black is an eloquent way of saying so.

Here's one final black thought. I can envisage a brighter future for much-maligned black. Because it absorbs light and converts it to energy (usually heat), it is the (non) colour of solar panels. It could perhaps hold the key to our energy needs. So black may yet ditch Satan and save the planet. Now *that* would be the image makeover of all time. ■

Stockists **Calvin Klein**, calvinklein.com; **Cos**, cosstores.com; **Diane von Furstenberg**, dvf.com; **M&S**, marksandspencer.com; **Marni**, marni.com; **Zadig & Voltaire**, zadig-et-voltaire.com

THE LINE OF BEAUTY

The muse

Throughout history, certain women (and the occasional man) have inspired artists to feats of creativity. But the price they pay can be high. **Matthew Sweet** breathes deep and invokes the goddess

Calliope From c8th century BC

Artists and writers are cannibals. The muse is the figure that suggests some lunches bite back – or decline to be completely digested. But not all are as tough as the unassailable deity painted here by the Renaissance artist Cosimo Tura. This is one of the nine original Muses of Greek mythology. She's Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. Unless, of course, she's Euterpe, the musical muse. Or Polyhymnia, the muse of agriculture. Tura has been promiscuous with his iconography. Perhaps he wants to show who's master – art descends from the muses, Tura tames these women by scrambling their identities.

The Beautiful Simonetta

Botticell , late 15th century

If you think of the Italian Renaissance as a L'Oreal campaign, then Simonetta Vespucci was its Cheryl Cole. Simonetta, the wife of a Florentine nobleman, was known as the "queen of beauty", and though tuberculosis cut short her reign at the age of 23, she held dominion over art for 50 further years. Her image ruled Sandro Botticelli: her squarish head sprouted from the shoulders of his "Primavera", his Venus – and looks out from most of his pictures with the word "woman" in the title. He buried her body in his work; he asked for his own to be buried at her feet.

Embroidered velour dress, to order only, Emilio Pucci (emiliopucci.com); brooches worn in hair, both £20, from Paperdress Vintage (paperdressvintage.co.uk)

Photographer *Rick Guest*
Stylist *Olivia Pomp*
Hair and make-up *Nicky Tavilla*
Model *Kat Martinovska at M&P Models*

Elizabeth I
16th century (and AW11)
Elizabeth Tudor was muse by royal decree: it was through art and poetry that she disseminated the images that impressed her strength and moral purity upon her subjects. Spenser, Shakespeare and Raleigh all played their part in consolidating her power. These days, her inspiration is accepted without the veiled threat of block, axe or Tower. Her regal power has shaped the dark velour symmetries of this dress from the Italian label Emilio Pucci. With powder-pale skin and that great crown of orange hair, this model ascends – a runway Faerie Queene.

Marie Duplessis 1824-1847
Sometimes the muse surrenders her power at the moment of death. Marie Duplessis coughed her last at the same tender age as Simonetta Vespucci. And with that, she was no longer the French courtesan who commanded the attention and the purse-strings of half the men in the "Almanach de Gotha". Instead, her ghost was channelled by her former lover, Alexandre Dumas the younger, into the body of "La Dame aux Camélias" – and then commuted by Verdi into the heroine of "La Traviata". Now, at an opera house somewhere in the world, Madame Duplessis dies every night. >

Alice Liddell 1858 ▲
Alice, that sullen child-heroine of late north Oxford, haunts the collodion plates and the dreamlike fiction of Lewis Carroll – avatar of a stammering mathematician called the Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. But what was he to her or her to him? The nature of Dodgson's gaze has inspired a whole school of sub-Freudian bafflegab, which reduces these images to evidence from a late-Victorian crime scene. I detect something else: the modern idea of what childhood means, forming in the eye of the camera.

Portrait of the Marchesa Luisa Casati Giovanni Boldini, 1908 ►
Casati, heiress to an Italian count, squandered a fortune to plant images like this in the fossil record of our culture. She burnished her servants with gold leaf, wore live snakes as necklaces and dined with wax mannequins. Her reward was to be fixed by Boldini as a flurry of glossy black action. (Man Ray shot her as a wild-eyed vamp; Picasso and Proust paid her homage; Augustus John painted her as a human volcano.) When the money was spent, she wore brown paper frocks and put boot polish around her eyes. Nobody painted her then.

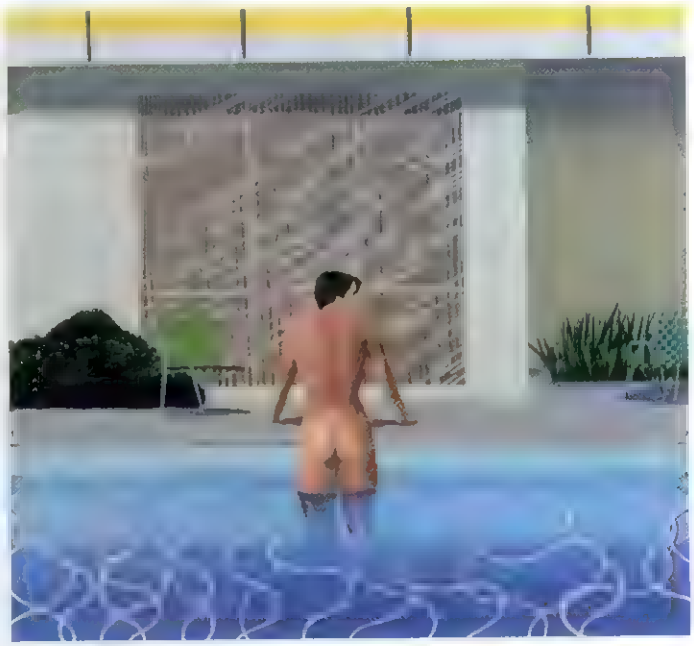
◄ **Caroline Blackwood** 1949
Lady Caroline Maureen Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood was a muse who gave inspiration to artists, musicians, poets – and could also suck the breath straight back. She was the late Lucian Freud's impossibly wide-eyed "Girl in Bed" (1952) – the photograph here, taken around the time of their marriage, shows something more predatory. Her third husband, the poet Robert Lowell, saw their relationship as an Odyssean trial. Blackwood was a "fearful mermaid" who "serves her winded lovers' bones in brine". True, she loved vodka more than fidelity, but she also knew the dangers that came with being framed – or caught in a net of stanzas.

Peter Schlesinger David Hockney, 1966

At art school, Hockney's muse was Cliff Richard. By the middle of the 1960s he redirected his adoration towards Peter Schlesinger, a Californian student who looked good against tilework. This picture, "Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool", is Schlesinger's moment – rising from that squiggly water like a pop-art Venus. The relationship between artist and model did not survive the decade, but Schlesinger's quiet dominance over Hockney's work endures. No matter how many trees or dogs Hockney paints, his muse's bottom will loom large over his obituaries.

Pattie Boyd 1966

Some muses are uneasy about their status. Not Pattie Boyd. Her 2005 exhibition of photographs in San Francisco was titled "Through the Eyes of a Muse". Eric Clapton composed "Layla" and "Wonderful Tonight" in her honour. Her effect upon her previous husband, George Harrison (*left*), is more questionable. She is the "you" of "I Need You", but her claim to the "something" of "Something" was disputed by its author, who asserted, bafflingly, that he was "thinking of Ray Charles" as he wrote it.



Tilda Swinton New York, 2008

Tilda Swinton isn't really an actor. Unwrinkle your nose – I too saw her cracking like an iceberg in "Michael Clayton". But she's defined less by the Oscar she won than by her decision to display herself in a glass case at the Serpentine Gallery – or by her status as official inspiration to the Dutch designers Viktor & Rolf. I'd hail her as the new Casati, though I suspect she'll be spared the boot-polish years. And even if she isn't, she'll doubtless do what all great muses do – resist the work that seeks to process them. Inspire the artist, and defeat the artist too. ■

Inès de la Fressange 1983

Karl Lagerfeld (*left*) doesn't hate Inès de la Fressange quite as much as he did. "I wish her all the luck in the world," he said, "just so long as I don't have to see her any more or hear her spoken about." She had been the long, angular, aristocratic body around which he built his frocks – but when she lent it to the French state as a model for Marianne, that feminised national symbol, Karl felt himself betrayed. And Inès, perhaps, was liberated.

NATIONAL GALLERY, BRIDGEMAN, MARY EVANS, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON, THE ARTS ARCHIVE/VIANA, COWELL, GETTY, DAVID HOCKNEY INC, CORBIS, DAVID ARMSTRONG/ART & COMMERCE

THE SCEPTICAL SHOPPER

Shady business

Are expensive paints with exotic names really worth paying extra for? Our undercover expert lifts the lid

WHAT DO YOU think might be the difference between Palladian White and Cotton White? Both are interior matt emulsion paints, sold in 2.5-litre cans, in stores and online. Yes, the former has a certain classical stoniness, while the latter is softer, with a just detectable creamy undertone. But the real difference is more concrete. Approximately £52 more concrete.

Palladian White is made by Fine Paints of Europe, an American company which sells Dutch-made, any-colour-you-can-think-of paint at $110 a can. Cotton White fills the shelves at the British DIY store B&Q, and costs £15.98. They might be at opposite ends of paint's price spectrum, but even in the middle of the rainbow – where you'll find, say, Farrow & Ball, which adorns the hallways of Britain's aspiring classes – you pay around 50% more for its String, or Clunch, or Elephant's Breath-coloured contents.

Though all paints are essentially equal – a blend of pigment, binder and solvent, nowadays almost always water – some are more equal than others. Organic pigments are chemically produced liquids that provide the colour, yet they vary wildly in quality, depending where, and how, they are made: Chinese pigments tend to fade quicker, and cost less, than those from Holland, the apogee of paintmaking since Vermeer first set pestle to mortar. Higher-cost paints may use multiple pigments to achieve their complex shades, whereas big-brand tins commonly contain just two, or occasionally three – this is why the spectrometers used by tradesmen's paint-copying services often fail to read the recipes of more expensive paints.

Then there are opaque pigments such as chalk, clay or talc. These add bulk: the higher their proportion, the cheaper the paint, but the less intensely coloured your living room. Binder, such as linseed oil or acrylic, holds the pigment molecules together; a higher-quality binder means a less patchy finish and, potentially, less painting. All of this is seasoned with a sprinkling of additives: some reduce bubbling and splashing, others increase washability or resistance to mould; others still – usually volatile organic compounds (VOCs), whose use is now restricted by law – slow drying, to give decorators time to work.

What's arguable is how much of all this is actually detectable once the paint is out of the tin. When I tested ten matt creamy off-whites, the evenness or otherwise of my ten yellowy-whitey patches seemed to have little to do with price. The worst performers were from Laura Ashley – thin, streaky, and £25 for 2.5 litres – followed by the £16 B&Q contender; the best results came almost equally from Farrow & Ball, Paint & Paper Library (sold in America as Stark Paint), both £29.50 – and Homebase Home of Colour, which at £14.49 cost less than half its upmarket rivals. As for finish, though much is often made of the desirably chalky texture of posh paints, all my test patches had an identical sheen, or lack of it.

The only stand-out difference was, suitably enough, the colours themselves. The more expensive paints had a noticeably knocked-back, muckier look: they glanced sidelong from beneath lowered lashes, while the cheaper paints just glared. I found myself desiring Paper I, but scorning Creamware.

This is why I'd argue it can be worth paying extra. You're being sold sophistication, and it comes at a price. High-end paint companies have creative directors grounded in fine art and architecture, with a marketable talent for knowing what colour will work where. Compare this approach with that of one big European paint manufacturer, which asked a fashionable florist I know to join a day-long "shade workshop". "They want to know what colour I think is 'coming'," she wailed down the phone. "I don't know. I mean – I like blue?" Mouse's Back, Palladian White, or "blue" – the choice is yours. ■

Chinese pigments tend to fade quicker than those from Holland, the apogee of paintmaking since Vermeer first set pestle to mortar

***Stockists Homebase**, homebase.co.uk; **Farrow & Ball**, farrow-ball.com; **Paint & Paper Library**, paintlibrary.co.uk*

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MAN IN A SUIT

Eric Parry

An artful architect finds himself in a suit worth building a wardrobe round

THE MAN

Eric Parry is a British architect as interested in the world of art as in the art of making buildings, and he usually combines the two. He has recently completed a hotly contested glass-and-ceramic extension for the Holburne museum of 19th-century art in Bath, along with an ethereal new spa for the Four Seasons Hotel in Park Lane, London, which he filled with elegant granite and limestone sculptures by the sculptor Stephen Cox. He is also the man behind the renovation of one of London's best-known churches, St Martin-in-the-Fields, for which the Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiary designed a daring new window. And his practice is working on the redevelopment and refurbishment of seven existing buildings in Piccadilly, for whose newly united façade the artist Richard Deacon is creating a dramatic ceramic artwork.

"I always like to be in a dialogue," says Parry. "If you're working with artists, the way [their work] integrates with the architecture and responds to it is absolutely fundamental." For one of his recent projects, a residential unit for the Olympic Athletes' Village, the budget was so tight that Parry did the art himself, adorning a series of panels on the balconies with abstract hand-painted scenes. "They're emotional, they're about colour," he says, having evidently relished the opportunity.

We photographed Parry at the foot of a stainless steel-clad, 18-storey office he has built on a compact site a few steps from London Wall and St Paul's Cathedral. The square in front is surprisingly spacious, tree-lined and light-filled for such a dense part of the city, while in the building's covered passage he has installed a bronze water-spout and a whimsical array of circular marble and stone seats. In a world dominated by productivity and technology, Parry says these features provide "a little bit of restorative nature", as well as "resonance and soul, a sense of the poetic in the everyday". It's an unexpected mix, but a welcome one.

THE SUIT

Though he is "most at home" in loose-fitting clothes that allow him to work unrestricted, Parry is nevertheless adamant about the virtues of putting on a crisp white shirt before an important meeting. "It gives you that sense of transformation, like you're going on stage." Similarly, he found wearing this vivid blue suit by Calvin Klein akin to a "performance" – in a good way. "I have a blue suit at home," he says, "but it's a sort of dark, mercantile blue, rather well-behaved, whereas this is beautifully electric. It reminds me of those great pigmented sculptures by Anish Kapoor. It's audacious." ~ GIOVANNA DUNMALL

THE DETAILS

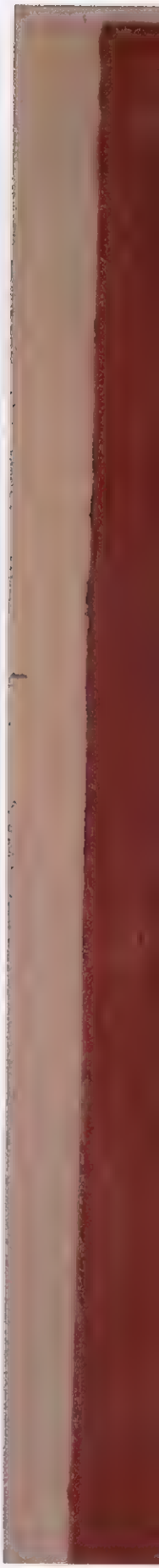
Blue blazer, £625, and **trousers,** to order only, both Calvin Klein Collection; **white double-cuff shirt,** £135, Hugo Boss Black; **black shiny lace-up shoes,** £235, Hugo Boss; belt, stylist's own

Stockists Calvin Klein Collection, *calvinklein.com;*
Hugo Boss, *hugoboss.com*

PHOTOGRAPHER **DANIEL SWALLOW** STYLIST **CRYSTAL McCLORY**
Stylist's assistant ***Dani Bavister***

A ONE-MAN MARKET

It started with 32 soup cans at $100 each. Almost 50 years later, Andy Warhol is a colossus whose work accounts for one-sixth of contemporary art sales. How did that happen, and is he really worth it? **Bryan Appleyard** canvasses the experts



Sara Friedlander, the 27-year-old head of First Open Sale at Christie's in New York, has a startling view of American art history. "Nothing good was made in the 19th century, nothing really good was made in the 18th century and American art in the 20th century for the first three, four or five decades was very elitist."

There was, in this view, no American Titian or Picasso, Raphael or Matisse. And then, suddenly, on July 9th 1962, there was. That was the date of the first solo show by Andy Warhol, the 33-year-old son of Slovakian immigrants. It was at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and it consisted of a series of 32 paintings of Campbell's Soup Cans, one for each flavour – beef, clam chowder, cheddar cheese, etc. The response was underwhelming. Five sold for $100 each, but the gallery owner bought them back to keep the series intact.

Nevertheless, by the end of that year, Warhol had conquered New York, the capital of the art world, and America had the artist for which she had been waiting. "He reached a public", says Friedlander, "that no artist was able to do before him. Because he was able to accomplish what nobody else had done and in the way he was able to influence what came after him, I think that makes him, I would guess, the greatest artist of the 20th century."

There is nothing unorthodox about this claim. Almost unanimously, today's young art fans adore Andy as earlier generations adored Pablo Picasso or Jackson Pollock. "To the under-45s", says Georgina Adam of the *Art Newspaper*, "Warhol is what Picasso used to be to an older generation... and, like Picasso, he has become a man for all seasons."

This vast fan base has been reinforced by the shrewd licensing arrangements negotiated by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, established under the terms of the artist's will. There have been Warhol skateboards, Warhol editions of Dom Pérignon champagne and countless Warhol fashion lines, including Pepe jeans and Diane von Furstenberg dresses. But, in a wider sense, Warhol's colours and styles – especially his use of pop style – pervade the culture. Any city street shows evidence of the astonishing power and durability of his imagery.

The market backs the enthusiasm of the young. Those original soup cans are not for sale: bought by the Los Angeles dealer for $1,000, they were sold to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1996 for $15m, a deal that promoted Warhol to art's first division. In 2008 a 12-foot-wide Warhol painting entitled "Eight Elvises", made in 1963, broke the $100m barrier, putting him in the same lofty bracket as >

Warhol by himself (I)
"Self-Portrait, 1967" is haunting and powerful, with layers of vibrant colour that demand close examination

THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/TATE

The bucks start here
"$4", 1982

THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/ART RESOURCE NY

> husband of my classmate Olga Knipper – Anton Chekhov.

I would make a pilgrimage to Leo Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana and maybe even get a cup of tea with the great man. His death at a remote railway station in 1910 would feel like an earthquake. And so would the death of one of the theatre's patrons, Savva Morozov, who financed Lenin's newspaper and killed himself in the south of France in 1905. In October 1917, Lenin would come to power as a result of the Bolshevik coup. I would hear the shooting outside the Moscow Art Theatre and see the wounded carried into the foyer on stretchers. Many of my peers would embrace the revolution, some seeing it as part of a tectonic shift, others eyeing the enormous artistic opportunities it offered – constructivist architecture being just one example.

In 1918, while on tour through the south of Russia and Ukraine, I would get cut off from the Bolsheviks by the White Army and would travel through the still-free Tiflis (Tbilisi) and then on to Istanbul and London, where I would hope to end my days.

PRINCETON, 1949
J.M. Ledgard

Autumn in the Ivy League. A Halloween jack-o'-lantern on the doorstep. A clear morning, with breezes all the way from the ocean. The colours on the leafy American street come as if from a dream: reds and golds gusting.

A brisk walk to a diner by the Princeton campus. Stools and counters are lined with chrome, the lighting is viscid. Breakfast is ham and eggs, coffee, a cigarette; the newsprint is inky, the news is from Moscow.

Mid-morning, an appointment with Einstein at the Institute for Advanced Study. A technical discussion, pushing around ideas about energy and star systems, Einstein hopping, the trees blazing through the window.

Meetings with students, a run around the muddy pitches, then back to the house.

Home is not home. It is a large upstairs apartment, Nabokovian you could say, with few items, some portable heirlooms…having arrived from Europe, having escaped all that, and yet the losses and victory of the war still too close to fall into any perspective.

The remains of the day are bright and warm on the bedroom balcony. Raked leaves burn on a bonfire in the garden below. Solitary drinking, smoking, listening to records; Polish songs, or Czech, at once far away and ever so close.

The special part is that this place is freedom, is possibility, is reinvention. Coincidentally, and impossible to see from the balcony, or even from Einstein's study, it is the high-water mark of abundance on the planet, the maximum moment, of consumption without a sense of an ending.

EARLY CHILDHOOD
Ann Wroe

I'd choose to live in very early childhood, just at the beginning of discernment. There's no time there, beyond the eternal rhythm set by meals at the breast and the oblivion of sleep, which comes as gently and immediately as the closing of an eye; there's no place there, beyond one patch of sunlit grass, one fold of blanket, and the whole enormous world laid out for exploring.

In this time and place, poets tell us, dreams and waking are the same; we move easily from one to the other. We may still keep, as Wordsworth supposed, intimations of some ante-natal life, and know why we home like bees towards the song of a bird or the sparkle of sunbeams on water. With our small hands, we believe that everything can be grasped; with our small, soft mouths we try to eat it all, assuming everything we find will be sweet and rich as milk.

No one makes demands on us, and the world revolves effortlessly round no one but ourselves. Our griefs are soothed and forgotten almost before the tears fall. We are carried if we want to be, in hugging arms, but we can pull ourselves up, reach things, and creep away from where we're put: every day more confident, stronger, keener-eyed. Slowly, like a shell, the world opens and light floods in. Any day now, we'll stand to meet it.

Everything is new, unnamed, important, and belongs to us. A stone is new, and a blade of grass. We see their potential as unlimited, like our own. We make time for it. A puddle astonishes us. A piece of paper, blown by the wind, becomes a playmate, and the night-time tree a ragged monster. Coleridge once took his crying baby son out of the house to show him the moon; the moon silenced him, shining on his tears. It is good to be silenced by beauty. Too briefly we stay there. But infancy makes of everywhere the best time and the best place. ■

HAVE YOUR SAY
What time and place gets your vote?

GETTY

SO, WHAT WAS THE BEST TIME AND PLACE TO BE ALIVE?

AMERICA, c.15,000BC
Lucy Kellaway

For women, there was only one time and place better than here and now to be alive – and that was 10,000 to 20,000 years ago on the Pacific north-west coast of what is now America, or anywhere else that was nice and fertile.

Men and women in these hunter-gatherer tribes were the most equal they have ever been. Rich and poor were pretty equal too. With no property, there was no question of feeling hard done by when you failed to keep up with the Paleolithic Joneses. There was no unemployment, no horrible bosses.

Everyone was self-employed, with women toiling away at one of life's nicest pastimes: digging up roots and picking berries. The great thing about foraging was that it didn't take all day, and so left more time for enjoyment than humans have had at any time since. In the absence of iPads and PlayStations, people frittered away their time on three pleasures that the modern age does not encourage: chatting, playing with children and having sex with more than one person. When Larkin said that sexual intercourse began in 1963, it was a good line, just several thousand years out.

Hunter-gatherers were taller and healthier than the farmers who followed them. They had more varied diets and so weren't at risk of famine. They also had great teeth. While the more recent past was ruined by toothache, these earlier people achieved American teeth without the tedium of flossing and pricey visits to the hygienist.

There were a few disadvantages to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Your chances of being ripped limb from limb by a wild animal were greater than if you live in, say, Toronto in 2011. And when you got fed up with chatting to fellow tribesfolk (or having sex with them), you couldn't watch "Downton Abbey". On the other hand, you were most unlikely to die from obesity-related diseases or get blown up by terrorists. And you wouldn't have felt obliged to employ a therapist to help with low self-esteem brought on by the fact that your back view isn't as trim as Pippa Middleton's.

JAPAN, 784-1185AD
Robert Guest

The world of 1,000 years ago was a miserable place: dirty, war-scorched and mostly illiterate. But not in Japan. The Heian era (784-1185) was one of peace. The brutal samurai who beheaded peasants to test their blades were yet to come. Japan was ruled by aristocrats who cared nothing for the art of war but were devoted to poetry, music, calligraphy and romantic love. One Victorian historian described the culture as "foully licentious". To me, it sounds rather fun.

A typical day for the nobles in Heian Kyo (now Kyoto) might involve sitting beneath the plum blossoms and composing poems about how sad it was that something so beautiful should wither so quickly – a reminder of the transience of life. Then everyone would get drunk or wander off for a tryst in a secluded temple.

Women and men alike were expected to be promiscuous. The only shame was to be insensitive. A doltish love letter would prompt your lover to ditch you. An eloquent one, written with a skilful brush and delivered with a flower that echoed its central metaphor, would win her heart. She would then hold out a hand from behind her screen and pull back her voluminous sleeve an inch or so, indicating that it was time to make love.

It was an era of great joy and great art, from Murasaki Shikibu's "Tale of Genji" to Sei Shonagon's "Pillow Book". Life was not so great for the peasants who did all the work, but I'm presumptuously assuming that I'd be a hanger-on at court. I'd soon get used to the Heian ideal of feminine beauty, which demanded blackened teeth, plucked eyebrows, big hair and pale faces. And best of all, the tea ceremony – that most tedious of pastimes – would not be invented for another 500 years.

RUSSIA, 1870s-1900s
Arkady Ostrovsky

"The Devil took me to be born in Russia," wrote Alexander Pushkin. Finding a time to live in these parts without being tortured, killed, starved or repressed is hard. If you want peace and quiet it is the wrong place. But for excitement, ideas, political turmoil and great art, the time to be born was the mid-1870s. Serfdom had been abolished and the economic and cultural boom of 1890-1900 was still to come.

A new class of entrepreneurs would soon transform big cities like Moscow. Art Nouveau mansions were replacing the nondescript architecture of the 1860s. Jews were still confined to the pale of settlement and denied higher education, but being born into a professor's family, I would be exempt from these restrictions. We would occupy a large apartment just behind the main building of the Imperial Moscow University where my father would teach biology. (Ivan Pavlov would come for dinner.) But I would be more interested in theatre than in science.

As a boy, I would spend hours in the Hermitage Gardens, spellbound by its fireworks, tightrope walkers and theatrical extravaganzas such as "The forests of India, on the shores of the Ganges, in the land of white elephants". Against my parents' wishes, I would enrol in the Philharmonic Society. Upon graduation, I would join the Moscow Art Theatre, started in 1898, after an 18-hour discussion, by my teacher Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and a rich young amateur director, Konstantin Alekseev, better known as Stanislavsky. I would play a small part in a new play by the >

> when he surveys Greek history up to then. The striking part is, it only lasts a couple of pages. History is still on Series One. And maybe that sense of freshness is why the present doesn't hold all the cards. Our own excitement in the rich, free West seems to have leaked away. A third of us can't be bothered to use the votes Libyans are dying for. We have freed slaves, empowered women, shaken off tyrants. We should be living happily ever after, yet we're not. Reason enough to tack against time and find a place where the future hasn't gone stale.

It's tempting to go by what you might witness – Socrates arguing with Plato in Athens, their contemporary Confucius riding through China, or Julius Caesar tangling with Cicero in 50BC Rome. But that would just be time tourism.

The Byzantine empire at its height would be hard to beat for other-worldly glitter, but the power of church and emperor rules it out. Knights on horseback put the Middle Ages out of bounds as far as I'm concerned. Of all the Renaissance states, Vicenza in the 16th century stands out, with Palladio to build you a villa and a chance to studio-crawl round some of the Venetian artists who fill our museums today. Amsterdam in the golden age of the 17th century also comes close, but that's putting a lot of weight on culture, and we need something broader. The French *ancien régime* is almost appealing enough to mute my objection to absolute monarchs. Talleyrand, the sly politician who grew up under it and survived the twists and turns of its demise, maintained that "anyone who hasn't lived in the 18th century before the revolution does not know the sweetness of living."

Part of the challenge is that we're not just looking for a single charismatic moment. Places exist in time. What have the old people seen? What's in store for the children? We're looking for a turning point, a place living through changes whose effects are with us still. Which brings us to London in the 1690s, just after the Glorious Revolution that drove James II from his throne in a coup led by Prince William of Orange.

This London has a back story as rich as its potential. Its old people might have shaken the hand of Shakespeare, as well as surviving two civil wars; their grandchildren will die in the capital of a global empire. Around them, a whole new world is taking shape. At Jonathan's coffee house, you can watch the stockmarket being born; insurance is being invented at Lloyd's, and the new Bank of England is laying the foundations of national finance. Walking down Cheapside, you can buy an uncensored newspaper or stop to pray in a chapel of your choice. Your father couldn't do either. Parliament has just begun a continuous tradition of government that will last for centuries. In the bookshops around Westminster Hall, you can buy Isaac Newton's "Principia" warm off the press, as well as economic texts that talk for the first time about supply and demand, the way money isn't fixed in value, and why credit matters more than gold. And you may well understand what they are saying, because enlightenment disciplines are still young and connected enough for a generalist to grasp.

Leisure is thriving in 1690s London. Pleasure gardens are opening and French food is all the rage, swept in by Huguenot immigration. You can go to the first night of Vanbrugh's "The Relapse", or Purcell's "The Fairy Queen". Coffee houses are packed and the craic is good: the age of wits such as Steele and Addison is dawning. Fashion has arrived, and the Strand is full of luxury shops whose display windows are a novelty, as are most of the things they sell. Best of all, the walk across town takes far longer than it took your father because this is becoming the first monster metropolis. "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life," Samuel Johnson said 80 years later. You can watch his sparkling city take shape.

No one is celebrating yet. People are saying there'll be another coup and the newfangled stockmarket will crash again. That's all part of the charge. Things are happening in London – tolerance, freedom of the press and parliament, consumerism, scientific breakthroughs, economic transformation – that millions of people will still be benefiting from 320 years later. In the coffee house, they talk of the new mathematics for calculating probability. That's what the insurance market is about, as well as the gambling craze that's ruining aristocrats all over town: a whole new engagement with possibility, an understanding that the future isn't going to be like the past. And that's what draws me to London in the 1690s, despite the wigs, the quack doctors and the stink of coal smoke. The modern world is starting, and I want to be there.

Tea with Tolstoy
Pre-revolutionary Russia gets Arkady Ostrovsky's vote

SCALA

WHAT WAS THE BEST TIME AND PLACE TO BE ALIVE?

THE BIG QUESTION

If you could travel back in time, what would be your destination? We put the question to a group of contributors and guests, starting with the historian PATRICK DILLON

MAKING HIS OWN choice of the best time to have been alive, Edward Gibbon, author of "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" (1776-89), didn't have much doubt. "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." This was the second century AD, when Rome's "five good emperors", Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, brought a peace and stability that western Europe would – in Gibbon's view – never see again. But maybe it was an easier question then. Gibbon was white, smart and male. He could walk from the right end of one hierarchical society into another without a tremor. Nor was he sacrificing much technology to do so. Barring gunpowder and the printing press, his world and Hadrian's were close enough to let Gibbon swap breeches for a toga and barely notice the difference.

For us, the question needs a little more thought. Anyone who dislikes pain, prefers their operations under anaesthetic, and has no wish to die of smallpox, might well choose to live now. We can balance that by awarding ourselves perpetual good health, but it's harder to level the playing field when it comes to gender. Not many modern women, however frustrated with their lot, would choose to go back to long skirts, tight corsets and a general assumption that they are stupid. The same may apply to any European who isn't white, and to anyone in the less affluent three-quarters of society. My children once went on a school trip to Apsley House, the Duke of Wellington's home. I thought they were going to learn about lords; instead they were taught what it was like being a servant. Transport most of us to ancient Rome and we'll find ourselves in a poorhouse or slave barracks. To give our question a chance, we have to assume that we can do our time travel, if not first-class, then in premium economy, switching genders if we feel like it, to land somewhere moderately comfortable.

This isn't a question about technology, where the present will always trump the past. It's about lifestyle and ideas, people and manners, things that ebb and flow. Armed with a passport to the good life in a time and place of our choice, not many will pass on the journey. Culture-vultures will book their seats in Shakespeare's Globe in 1599 or the Cotton Club, Harlem, in the 1920s. Hero-worshippers will queue up to watch Michelangelo chisel stone in 1501 or Genghis Khan ride into battle in 1206. Epicures, the most prudent time-travellers, will follow Gibbon to Rome, or time their birth to dodge a call-up for the world wars and surf the Pax Americana.

Peace and stability are all very well, but several of mankind's giant leaps have come in times of war. Democracy got going, and conversation buzzed, in Athens in the fifth century BC, with the Peloponnesian war raging outside. I'd brave the 16th-century Wars of Religion to catch the Reformation, or the Thirty Years War (1618-48) to watch the Enlightenment dawn. What I'm after is a sense of possibility. There's a striking moment at the start of Thucydides' "Peloponnesian War" >

GETTY

Warhol by himself (II)
Long after the "Self-Portrait" on page 67, Warhol tackled himself again – to less effect. Striking as the picture is, it is a poster, a one-liner

> VALERIE SOLANAS WAS a radical feminist who believed in the violent creation of an all-female society. In 1967 she asked Warhol to produce her play "Up Your Ass", but he lost the script and Solanas started demanding payment. Finally, in June 1968, she turned up at the Factory and shot him in the chest. It was a grievous wound – Warhol had to wear a corset for the rest of his life to, as he put it, "keep my insides in" – and he only just survived.

Solanas was imprisoned, though only until 1971, and she died in 1988. But she was not forgotten. In 1996 a film of her life – Mary Harron's "I Shot Andy Warhol" – appeared and some feminists still claim her as a hero of the cause. But she is also remembered as a key player in the history of contemporary art. The shooting was a creative as well as a medical turning point for Warhol. The experience seemed to intensify his own sense that his life was not quite real. "Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half-there than all-there – I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life...Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television. The channels switch, but it's all television."

Most now agree – even in the midst of the current frenzy – that the shooting marked the start of a steady decline in the quality of Warhol's work. Nothing more vividly demonstrates this decline than two self-portraits, nearly 20 years apart, currently on display at Tate Modern in London. The picture from 1986, the year before his death, shows the now gaunt features in red, topped by his fright wig. It is striking and beautifully composed, but it is a poster, a one-liner. The picture from 1967 is haunting, powerful, with layers of vibrant colour that demand close examination.

When the average cultivated punter now thinks of a Warhol, they will almost certainly be thinking of a Marilyn Monroe, a Jackie Kennedy, an Elvis Presley, a soup can or even an electric chair made between 1962 and 1968. What they will not be thinking about is the ten portraits from 1980 entitled "Jewish Geniuses" or his endless pursuit of the rich, famous and powerful as patrons and subjects – Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger, Liza Minnelli, John Lennon, Diana Ross, the Shah of Iran. One thing nobody can really claim Warhol has in common with Picasso is lifelong inspiration and creativity. After the shooting he slowly ground to an aesthetic halt.

But perhaps it can be said that Warhol's legacy is more wide-ranging than Picasso's. Arthur Danto's conviction is that he changed everything he touched, that his influence is universal. "Even Picasso was a more limited kind of figure, a great artist for sure, but he was an inventor of styles. I think what Andy was was an inventor of no styles at all."

Warhol's posture of opposition to meaning and the idea of the specialness of art was constantly being extended. In movies he subverted all artifice, not just by showing a man sleeping, but, later, by filming random scenes of anti-acting by his cast of "superstars". In "A Novel" (1968) he took apart fiction by using straight transcriptions of the conversational ramblings of his friends. And, by adopting the Velvet Underground, he created the most savagely nihilistic rock band of them all. He even took on the philosophers – "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)" (1975) consists of transcriptions of his spoken thoughts. But, though such things undoubtedly leave traces in the culture, they are dead ends in ways in which his best paintings were not. Nobody needs to do a mindlessly transcribed novel again or even read one, but many need to plunder the genuine riches of the pre-shooting Warhols.

Finally, Julian Stallabrass makes a crucial point about Warhol's current stature. "You know this work really engages people in the art world. Maybe what has really changed in the last few years is that people have been finding out, essentially through publishing their own works on social networking sites, that making things that look a bit like art isn't at all hard and that is very demystifying and empowering."

Warhol now endorses a way of life. One simple technology – silk-screen printing – dominated his career. But it was enough to show today's technology-laden, hyper-connected youth that they could do it too. With the instant publication of digital pictures and videos, anybody can become a cyber-Warhol, swimming in the great ocean that pop imagery has become. Apple's Photo Booth software reduces the whole thing to a single click – just by selecting "pop art" under "effects" you can change your face into a very credible Warhol multiple self-portrait. Andy, in death, is a generation's mentor.

The Andy Warhol Foundation and the market may want him to be Leonardo or Picasso, but the young want him to be what Arthur Danto says he is, the overthrower of all such pretensions. It is in this balance of aspirations that Warhol, the god of contemporary art, now exists. In time this phase will pass and the idea that Warhol is a greater artist than, say, Robert Rauschenberg or Jackson Pollock will be seen as the absurdity that it is. The bubble will burst, prices will fall and the drinker of all that Campbell's soup will be restored to his rightful place – as a briefly brilliant and very poignant recorder of the dazzling surface of where we are now.

The intellectual excitement of his attempt to destroy meaning is also close to its sell-by date. Prompted by Warhol, conceptualism – art driven by ideas rather than sensuous and emotional engagement – has ruled the art world for more than 20 years. It is a machine aesthetic, a desire to make art that is beyond human, and Andy always wanted to be a machine. But, though all art is in constant, self-questioning flux, one thing never changes – the longing to define, synthesise and express the human condition. In the absence of religion, it is art's job to do this. For six years, despite his claims to the contrary, Warhol was an artist, a generator of meanings. Valerie Solanas and his own social ambitions put an end to this. Now it is time for us, and the market, to adjust to the fact that it is over. ■

THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/TATE THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/MOMA/SCALA

Thinking outside the frame
Warhol's Brillo boxes. The philosopher Arthur Danto thought they represented "a completely new way of thinking about art"

In a crucial passage in his book "American Visions" (1998), the great critic Robert Hughes summarised Warhol's aesthetic: "It all flowed from one central insight: that in a culture glutted with information, where most people experience most things at second or third hand through TV and print, through images that become banal and disassociated by being repeated again and again and again, there is a role for affectless art. You no longer need to be hot and full of feeling. You can be supercool, like a slightly frosted mirror...Warhol...was a conduit for a sort of collective American state of mind in which celebrity – the famous image of a person, the famous brand name – had completely replaced both sacredness and solidity."

Clement Greenberg, meanwhile, realising that Warhol had flung a pot of vinyl paint in the face of the AbExes, was dismissive. "I find his art sappy. The big-screen portraits and all these things. Who cares about them?" He knew the critical basis of his entire career was being assaulted by pop.

"The whole of pop art", explains Stallabrass, "was a reply to Greenberg." Greenberg was defending art as a specific category, something set aside from the ordinary world. But, as Danto saw, Warhol created art that was an arbitrary aspect of the ordinary. There was no special category, girded by a language of depth and meaning; there was just what was defined as art at any given time. Being famous and making money was as legitimate a goal for the artist as self-exploration.

Ever since, the central theme of anti-Warhol sentiment is that he sold out, not just himself but the whole idea of art. The philosopher Roger Scruton argues that he had nothing to say: it really was all about money. "It is worth pointing out that there is neither beauty, nor elegance nor style in anything that Warhol did, and that the very media he chose were reflections of the moral emptiness within him. But since the result (like the silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe) convey that emptiness, there is nothing in them to understand; in no way do they present a challenge to the observer, other than the challenge to his chequebook. And if you are extremely rich, extremely stupid and morally vacant, why not write a cheque to prove it?"

The pro-Warhol response to that is that it misses the point. The chequebook *is* the aesthetic. "I think the argument one could well make", says Noah Horowitz, "is that in some sense his whole thing, his MO, his method of production was totally tied into that [the market], and it's one thing to analyse and criticise and do something aesthetic with that structure but Warhol embraced it and made it his aesthetic."

So either Warhol was an empty product of money or he made art out of money. Take your pick. >

THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/GETTY BRIDGEMAN

More milk, dear?
Warhol with his mother, Julia Warhola, in 1964. She lived in his basement in Manhattan and used to give him Campbell's soup

> momentously, a pile of Brillo boxes.

Arthur Danto was a professor of philosophy at Columbia at the time. Interested in contemporary art, he visited the Stables gallery and saw the boxes. "I was working on a five-volume work on analytical philosophy," he tells me, "my head was full of Descartes and Russell and all the other tough thinkers and, when I walked into the Stables, I suddenly thought that art has finally caught up with philosophy and Andy did it. I was stunned and I changed the whole direction of my work. This was a completely new way of thinking about art."

Danto – who is now the grandest pillar in the edifice of Warhol appreciation – was preoccupied with how we evaluate our perceptions. From Descartes he inherited the mystery of how we could tell the difference between waking and sleeping consciousness. How did we know which was more real? Warhol's boxes asked the same question by replacing "real" with "art". How did we know which was more "art", a van Gogh or a Brillo box? "Andy showed that art and non-art cannot be told apart just by looking at them."

Marcel Duchamp had done this decades earlier, in 1917, by taking a urinal, signing it, exhibiting it and calling it "Fountain". But there was still something timeless – and, therefore, arty – about a urinal. Warhol hardened the theme by choosing something that was utterly contemporary and ephemeral. The following year he made the movie "Sleep", showing a man sleeping for five hours and 20 minutes. He had also, by then, founded the Factory, the defiantly named Manhattan location that became his headquarters, production line and studio. Its flamboyant radicalism made him a hero of the young, often with catastrophic consequences.

"I had a couple of students, actually my best students," Danto says. "They decided to go down to the Factory and they were ruined, completely ruined, as thinkers. They got druggy. I had imagined they would be serious philosophers but that never happened."

The defiance of the name lay in the idea that art could be produced in a factory, like any other consumer good. Warhol's art was not supposed to be a matter of emotion, introspection or spiritual quest; it was to be an image, pure and simple. "During the 1960s," he wrote knowingly in 1975, "I think, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I don't think they've ever remembered."

This pursuit of affectlessness was what outraged – and still outrages – some critics and artists. According to Gary Indiana, de Kooning screamed "You destroyed art!" in Warhol's face.

was a heroic confrontation between the artist and the canvas. The result, in the words of the critic Harold Rosenberg, was "not a picture but an event". Jackson Pollock laid his canvases on the floor and dripped paint on them. Mark Rothko's shimmering veils of paint yearned romantically for the beyond. Morris Louis and Barnett Newman barely disturbed the blankness with their marks. Willem de Kooning embraced chaos as he stabbed at his just-about-figurative images. These were existential heroes of Bohemia, not of the saleroom; their quest was limitless, spiritual and meditative.

The AbExes found their voice in Clement Greenberg. An incisive, highly intellectual critic, he explained the artists to themselves and the world. Primarily, he told them that a painting was not a window on the world; it was a world, a wholly distinct, two-dimensional event. The viewer and the artist both engaged with paint and canvas, not with some external realm, like the life of the peasant that lay beyond van Gogh's boots. Painters were not even required to engage with three-dimensional space, such was the primal truth of the canvas.

Meaning in abstract expressionism lay in the heroic act of the artist. In Rothko it lay in a form of spiritual contemplation; in Pollock it emerged from the carefully contained workings of chance. The personality of the artist was crucial. The paintings were windows that looked inwards to psychology rather than out to the world. They were hermetic, recognisable only as elevated forms of introspection. As Sara Friedlander puts it, they were "only interested in themselves".

AbEx was the orthodoxy of the 1950s, but it was a paradoxical posture, curiously opposed to the spirit of the age. The post-war boom was getting under way and new machines and goods were raining down on consumers. The world was entering the image-soaked future foreseen and described by Marshall McLuhan. And yet this was precisely what these world-conquering artists were not painting.

Warhol was as soaked in images as anybody. Through the 1950s he was a successful commercial artist, known, among other things, for his advertisements showing highly distinctive blotty ink drawings of shoes. But he was also a devoted gallery-goer, determined to break into the citadel of high art. In fact, though he is often talked about as the godfather of pop art, he was beaten into the citadel by several other aspirants, notably Roy Lichtenstein who, from 1961, produced his giant blow-ups of comic book images. Desperate, Warhol turned to Muriel Latow, an adventurous gallery owner. According to Tony Scherman and David Dalton in their book "Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol", he said to her, "Just tell me what to paint."

In return for a $50 cheque, she told him "to think of the most common, everyday, instantly recognisable thing he could". He thought of his doting mother, Julia Warhola. Warhol had been, according to the philosopher and critic Gary Indiana, her "tantrum-prone, acne-riddled, albino lion cub", a difficult and sick child to whom she gave maximum attention. He was spoilt – the family's "moody, tyrannical centrepiece" who "shaped weaknesses into weapons for rejecting anyone he didn't like and avoiding anything he didn't want to do". Julia lived in the basement of the Manhattan town house he had bought with his money from his advertising commissions. She used to give him soup for lunch – Campbell's soup.

The cans he exhibited in Los Angeles emerged both from his mother's menu and from a love of the colourful world of consumption. So they were not quite as impersonal as is often claimed. "Warhol's approach to pop culture", Scherman and Dalton argue, "was far from purely aesthetic: from childhood on, he loved its products and worshipped its heroes and heroines."

But his psychology played no part in their reception: they were seen as works devoid of introspection, shocking statements of the obvious. Whereas innocent viewers could stand in front of a Pollock and get no answer to the question "What is it?", they would get an immediate answer standing in front of a Warhol. "It's a soup can."

"It seems", wrote the artist Donald Judd of a 1963 Warhol exhibition, "that the salient metaphysical question lately is 'Why does Andy Warhol paint Campbell Soup cans?' The only available answer is 'Why not?' "

The 1962 Los Angeles show was followed, a few months later, by New York exhibitions which featured the massive "Marilyn Diptych" – 50 versions of a photo of Marilyn Monroe, 100 Soup Cans, 100 Dollar Bills and, even more >

> foundation wants Andy Warhol to be a high artist with high ideals, they want him to be like Leonardo da Vinci. They don't want to think that he just signed a lot of stuff without even looking at it, but he did."

If the works aren't always what they seem, neither are the auctions. "These sales are no longer auctions," says Allan Schwartzman, an art adviser. "To attract material at the top end, auction houses pre-sell the material to 'irrevocable bidders'. They are deliberate, orchestrated events." Irrevocable bids are guaranteed, pre-saleroom offers that ensure a work does not go unsold. But they also ensure that the price at auction may not strictly be a transparent meeting point between supply and demand; at times the auctions are little more than a theatre of private deals. Such arrangements are commonplace throughout the market, but they are especially important in the case of Warhol because of his absolute ascendancy and because of a market that is active while still being surprisingly narrow.

Christopher Gaillard does not think this is a problem. "Warhol is a global commodity now. His work is certainly supported by some key players we read about in the papers, but it's my belief that this is much more far-reaching than that. Warhol is the most powerful contemporary-art brand that exists. Picasso is another. It's about sheer, instant recognition and what comes along with it is a sense of wealth, glamour and power."

Whatever the hidden truth of the market, Warhol's ascendancy is out there in plain sight. And it is a perennial truth of the art business that high values tend to attract critical endorsement. "If you look at art history and criticism," says Julian Stallabrass of the Courtauld Institute in London, "a lot of it is promotional literature."

It is almost inevitable, therefore, that Warhol should be critically as well as commercially acclaimed. But the question is: does he deserve it? The answer begins with a pair of shoes.

IN 1886 VINCENT VAN GOGH painted a pair of very worn boots. It was a small painting – 18 inches by 15 – but a powerful one. It remains one of van Gogh's most familiar images. It is also one of the most densely discussed. Both the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the theorist and critic Frederic Jameson have pondered these boots. What they both conclude is that, in Jameson's words, "the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth."

The painting is not simply an arrangement of pigments, nor even, primarily, a representation of something. It is, rather, a statement about a world that lies beyond the painting – the hard life and work of the peasant who wore these boots. It is a portrait of the man and his life painted in his absence. The painting is a window through which we see not just these boots but their place in a world of toil and struggle.

That, in fact, is exactly how people usually look at art, as a physical embodiment of wider meanings. What other

One step back?
"A Pair of Shoes", 1886, by van Gogh (*above*), is a statement about a world, the theorist Frederic Jameson argues – whereas Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes", 1980-81 (*opposite*), "does not really speak to us at all"

reason is there to look at all? But Jameson goes on to compare van Gogh's boots with a Warhol print from 1980-81, "Diamond Dust Shoes". This work, says Jameson, "evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Nothing in this painting organises even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object."

That, in a nutshell, is the entire history of Warhol criticism. It all pivots on the meaning of the word "meaning" when applied to the visual arts. Warhol, a far more intelligent man than he liked to appear, understood this perfectly. "The more you look at the same exact thing," he said in 1975, "the more the meaning goes away and the better and emptier you feel." He also said: "Always leave them wanting less." He was in pursuit of an art that meant nothing.

The context in which his anti-definition of "meaning" appeared was that of a culturally triumphant post-war America. New York had usurped Paris as the capital of the art world and had given birth to its own art movement to rival those of the old Europe. Abstract expressionism ("AbEx") was widely seen as a statement that the United States need no longer suffer from any kind of cultural cringe. It has even been argued – though, in detail, also disputed – that these artists were financed and promoted by the CIA as ambassadors of freedom.

AbEx was a highly romantic version of modernism. It

THE WARHOL FOUNDATION/ART RESOURCE NY; CORBIS

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> Picasso, Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Gustav Klimt. The highest auction price, meanwhile, is $71.7m for "Green Car Crash" (1963). To put these dizzying prices in perspective, Titian recently achieved his highest ever auction price – $16.9m for "A Sacra Conversazione" from about 1560. This is an important picture by an artist many regard as the greatest painter that ever lived. But the market says that Warhol is more than five times better.

Warhol is now the god of contemporary art. He is indeed, it is said, the "American Picasso" or, if you prefer, the art market's one-man Dow Jones. In 2010 his work sold for a total of $313m and accounted for 17% of all contemporary auction sales. This was a 229% increase on the previous year – nothing bounced out of recession quite like a Warhol. But perhaps the most significant figure is the rise in his average auction prices between 1985 and the end of 2010: 3,400%. The contemporary-art market as a whole rose by about half that, the Dow by about a fifth. "Warhol is the backbone of any auction of post-war contemporary art," says Christopher Gaillard, president of the art consultants Gurr Johns. "He is the great moneymaker."

Some glee in the market is understandable – and not just because of the money. Warhol believed in fame and wealth: they were intrinsic to his aesthetic. The auctioneers are co-creators, carrying on Warhol's work post mortem, and the salerooms are extensions of the galleries. "How he would love it all!" says Sara Friedlander of the current frenzy. "I can see him at an auction, seated at front and centre with his Polaroid camera and his fright wig...I think of him in every sale we do."

Before Warhol, the believers argue, there was sterility; after Warhol there is a ravishing, visual cornucopia. Without him, they say, there would be no Jeff Koons, no Richard Prince, no Banksy, no Takashi Murakami, no Damien Hirst. Many of the fashionable artists in the world emerged from beneath Andy's fright wig.

There would also be no fun without Andy. The starting point for any assessment of his legacy is his instant accessibility: nobody need ever be puzzled by a Warhol – his lavish colours, his epic simplicity, above all his subject matter. "Andy always painted famous things," says the artist Michael Craig-Martin, "whether it was Liz Taylor or a Coke can."

"Even children love him," says Gul Coskun, a specialist Warhol dealer in London. "They stop their parents outside my shop. His pictures are big, colourful, they are not taxing academically. But they are taxing financially now."

All of which raises the question: is this a bubble – critical and financial – that will soon burst? In market terms, it seems likely if only because the rise in values has been so extreme. But the problem is that the market conceals more than it reveals. There are, it is said, 10,000 individual works – the exact number will only become clear when the vast catalogue raisonné is completed by the Warhol Foundation. They have just started work on Volume Four of this mighty project, but there is no current indication of when it will be finished.

About 200 Warhols come on the market each year. A large percentage are always bought by José Mugrabi, a New York-based dealer-collector who turns up at auctions in jeans, black T-shirt and baseball cap. Mugrabi made his money in textiles in Colombia. He moved to New York in 1982 and began collecting art. He likes to be seen to be buying and he is now believed to own 800 Warhols, some of them first-rank. Last year he is said to have bought more than 40% of the Warhols that came on the market. This scale of participation distorts the market and entails a risk of a swift collapse if Mugrabi were to withdraw. "The question is," says Noah Horowitz, author of "Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market", "what value would those works sustain if and when the market sees some sort of correction?"

Probably only the Andy Warhol Foundation, which also oversees authentication and commercial exploitation of the works, has more Warhols than Mugrabi. The gallery-owner Larry Gagosian has a few too: in 2008 he spent around $200m on 15 to 20 Warhols from the collection of Ileana Sonnabend, an early fan. It would not be quite true to say that Mugrabi, Gagosian and the foundation control the market, but nobody doubts their combined ability to push up prices by sheer brute force. And the prices are further bolstered by museum demand. Few museums with aspirations to represent contemporary art want to be without one of Warhol's pictures. But this demand is subject to critical fashion. It is safe, therefore, to assume the prices are higher than a strictly open market would allow.

ABOUT 200 WARHOLS ARE SOLD EACH YEAR. MANY ARE BOUGHT BY JOSE MUGRABI, WHO MADE HIS MONEY IN TEXTILES IN COLUMBIA. HE IS BELIEVED TO OWN 800 WARHOLS

On top of that, the foundation always has the last word on what is and is not a Warhol – which can be tricky given that the work in question may be no more than a Brillo-pad box. Its authentications have not always been accepted. Joe Simon, an American film producer, has been fighting a long war with the foundation over the authenticity of a self-portrait he bought for $195,000 in 1989 (for a full account, go to myandywarhol.com). Later, wanting to sell, he submitted it to the foundation, which pronounced it inauthentic, stamping it "denied". A further resubmission resulted in another stamp – he had, in the jargon of the trade, been "double-denied". The two marks, Simon feels, have ruined the painting. He now plans to sue the foundation. "This is not just my fight," he says, "it's a fight for the integrity of Andy Warhol's work."

"The problem is", says Georgina Adam, "that the >

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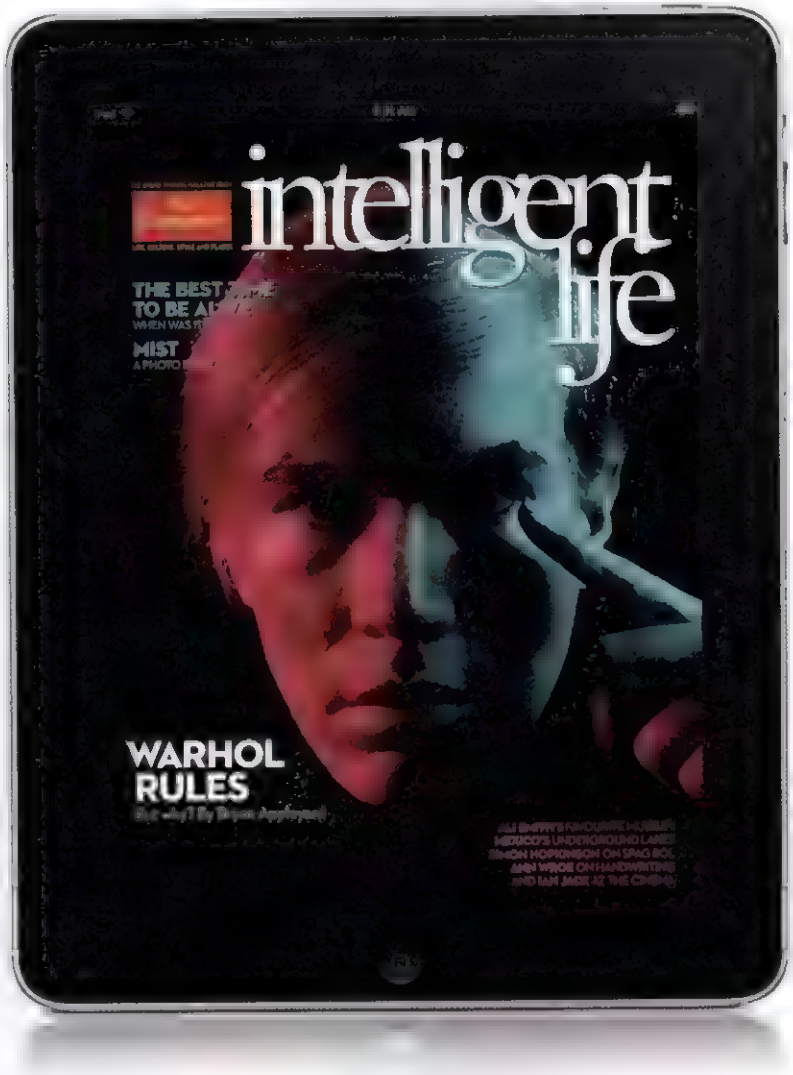

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A WORLD OF MIST

Autumn, Keats said, is the season of mists. A photo essay by **Steffen Schrägle** captures mist from New Zealand to Argentina, while **Robert Macfarlane** sums it up in words

South Island, New Zealand, June 2004
"I was driving around on a location scouting for a job and came upon this lake," Steffen Schrägle says. "It was amazing to see the red light coming through the mist, as if from a painting. A kind of fairy tale. Nothing moved, there was no wind, it was just magic to see this moment. I still don't know exactly where it was"

ABOVE
Dornstetten, Germany, December 2010
"This is a factory close to my home that makes packaging. The mist made it look suddenly different from usual – spooky"

RIGHT
Monegros, Zaragoza, Spain, February 2008
"I was driving from Barcelona to Madrid when these towers loomed in the mist and I felt as if I was in a silent war of the giants. You couldn't see more than 50 metres and we had to drive very slowly. The shapes came from nowhere and they went to nowhere"

MIST IS TRICKSTER weather. It steals silently in, turns familiar landscapes strange, dampens sounds, blurs vision – then clears suddenly and without warning. It has fairy-tale properties: to find yourself in mist is to be both enchanted and unsettled.

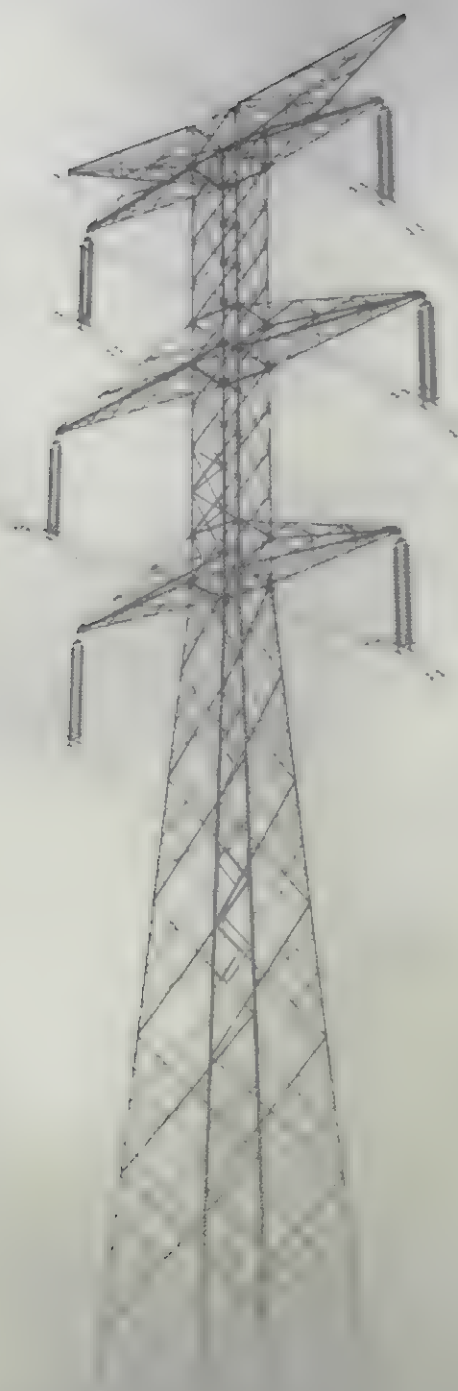
One of the eeriest hours of my life came in the Scottish Highlands. Five of us had climbed up, in thick snow, onto the summit plateau of a mountain called Beinn a' Bhuird. Five hundred feet short of the plateau we met a fine white mist. The snow and the mist combined to produce the phenomenon known as white-out, in which air and ground seem to melt together and the world becomes depthless.

Scale and distance were indeterminable. There were no shadows or waymarks. Even gravity felt unreliable that day: slopes and fall-lines could only be inferred by the tilt of blood in the skull. We traversed the plateau slowly for a mile and a half, each of us in a luminous pocket of mist, and when I looked left and right at my companions they appeared to be flying, borne aloft in soft white space. When at last we descended out of the mist, the Highland landscape was startling again.

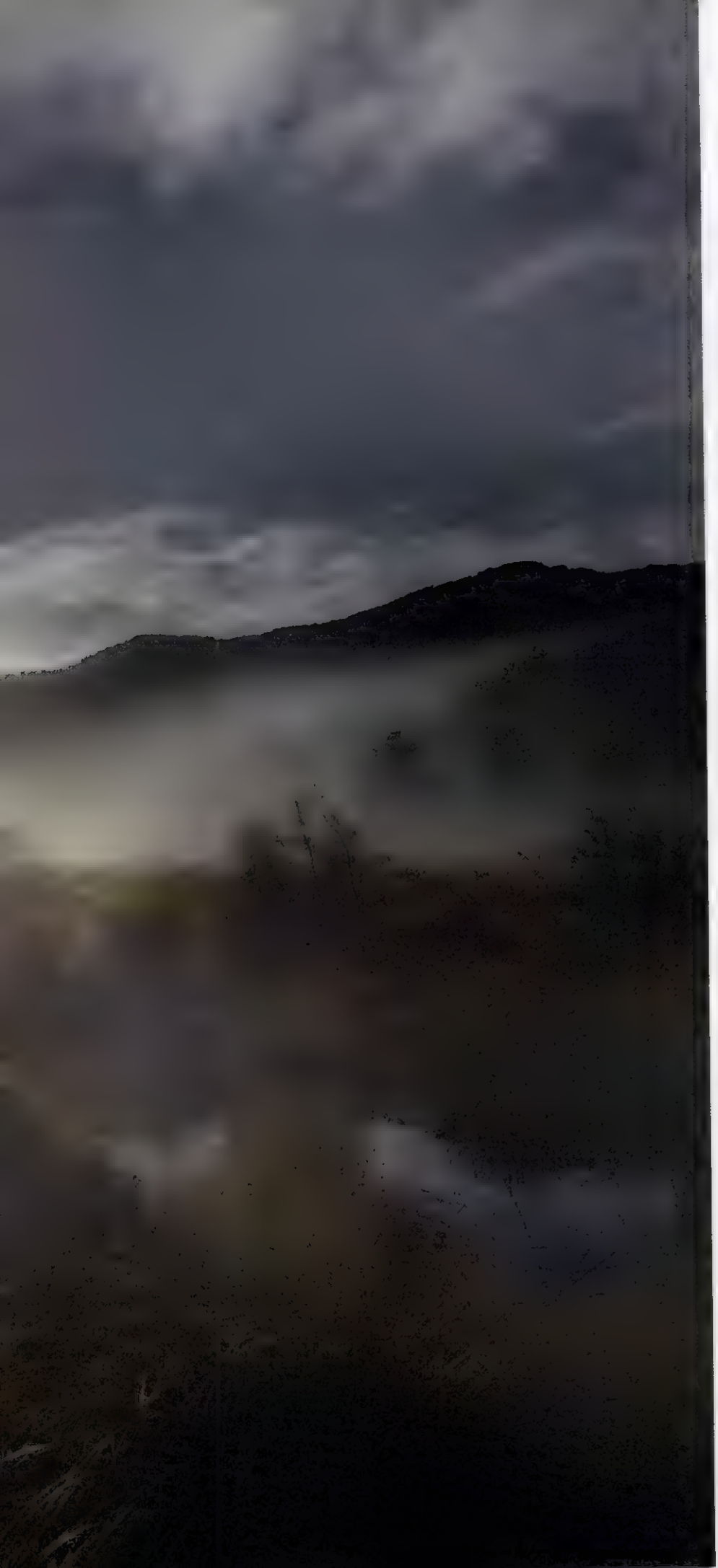
Steffen Schrägle's images of mist evoke its contradictions, the way it both conceals and reveals. A wide New Zealand lake becomes a study in pewter and greyscale, with the outlines of the far shore glimpsed spectrally across the water. A dawn mist, as it is burnt off by the morning sun, both swathes and discloses the hills that have bred it. Figures in a winter mist seem barely human, looming like ghosts or gods from the thickened air. Even industrial infrastructure is made enigmatic. Schrägle's mist-cloaked factory by night comes straight out of John le Carré: cold-war murk, furtive surveillance, a gathering tension.

Like its denser sister, fog, mist is best imagined as ground-level cloud. It consists of minute droplets of water suspended in the air: thus the rime of dew that lands on your eyebrows as you walk through it. Mist forms when warm moisture-laden air is cooled, causing the water to precipitate out. This is why autumn is, in John Keats's famous phrase, the "season of mists": the clear skies and dropping temperatures of the nights cool the earth, which in turn cools the humid air, sending mist smoking across fields or snaking up valleys.

Many walkers have had the revelatory experience of climbing up through a layer of morning mist and out into the sunshine above it. And city dwellers may have found themselves high in a tall building, looking down on a sea of mist – or >



South Island, New Zealand, June 2009
"Reflecting this shy morning feeling was a great experience. Again it came when I was driving around on a location scout, I wouldn't know where exactly. We had a break after driving many hours and I walked around to see a bit more than just a car park. And suddenly this impressive landscape appeared"



> perhaps its less appealing half-sister, smog – out of which only other skyscrapers jut, as in Schrägle's memorable shot of Chicago (*overleaf*). At such moments, mist acts as an editor, simplifying the view, suppressing the muddle of ground level. I once reached the top of a chalk hill just after dawn on a summer day, and looked down on a landscape filled with a shallow mist. All I could see were the tops of oak trees and the spires of churches, and it felt as if I had travelled back to the Middle Ages.

The subtleties of mist are easy to miss, especially when you are in it. The eye tends to perceive it only as smudge or sludge. Mist is, in fact, rich with nuance, possessing fine declensions of light and tone and sly scumblings – the family of effects that Renaissance art theorists called *sfumato*. Hard to see properly, mist is even harder to represent artistically. The *shan sui* (mountain-and-water) artists of Song Dynasty China (960–1279) took as their subjects the mist-wreathed and pine-forested mountains of eastern and southern China. Mist was a vital ingredient of their aesthetic – suggesting as it did nature's resistance to decisive categorisations – and they developed specialist brushwork and ink-wash techniques with which to evoke it. The *shan sui* tradition remains influential: on autumn days at the Huangshan (Yellow Mountain) range in Anhui Province, tens of thousands of Chinese tourists rise before dawn and climb rock staircases to see the sun rise over the misty granite slopes, as if gazing into a Song scroll.

Mist is crucial to one of the great paintings of European Romanticism: Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer Above a Sea of Clouds" (1818). The image may be more familiar than the title: a man in a black frock-coat stands on a sharp mountain summit, back to the viewer, hands at his sides. Below and beyond him is an ocean of white mist, pierced by peaks and pinnacles. The implications are appropriately clouded: is the traveller blessed with vision or threatened by obscurity? Is he master over his own direction, or lost?

Friedrich's work plays around the edges of Schrägle's photographs; there is the same atmosphere of poised ambivalence. Schrägle speaks of the "loneliness" brought on by mist, but also of its ability to offer a sense of security. His work, like Friedrich's, reminds us that mist is a meteorology of the mind: it changes the way we experience the world, leaving us mystified. ■

Chicago, July 2011
"The mist came in suddenly from the lake. I wanted to go higher up to shoot it and the only tower I could find quickly was the John Hancock Centre, a kind of symbol of Chicago. The white building at the front is the Onterie Centre and the dark one behind is the Lake Point Tower"

guazu, Argentina, March 20
heard about the energy of this
wanted to see it. Iguazu was built
waterfalls in the north of A
a permit to get in the natio
opened to the public. The
the waterfalls every
there and had them t
feel the energy comin
of nature. The sound was bre
mist was covering the falls

Ruhestein, Germany, December 2010
I was amazed how slow it seemed
when the people moved in the mist. A
kind of super-slow motion. And I felt
totally alone as the voices seemed to
be far away. I like to think the images
reflect this silence. We saw a few
different people. They were skiing and
snowboarding, yet they hardly seemed
to move.

Handwriting an elegy

As more and more of our words are tapped out on keyboards, writing by hand has become an endangered species. **Ann Wroe** dips her quill in a defiant pot of ink

TAKE A SHEET of paper. Better still, take a whole sheaf; writing prospers with comfort and cushioning. The paper may be deliciously thick, with ragged edges and a surface capillaried with tiny fibres of the rags that made it. It may be thin, blank, industrial A4, one of a thousand in a cut-price pack from Staples. It may be wove paper, vellum-smooth and shiny, or a bit of scrap, torn not quite straight, with a palimpsest of typed meeting-minutes showing through. But write.

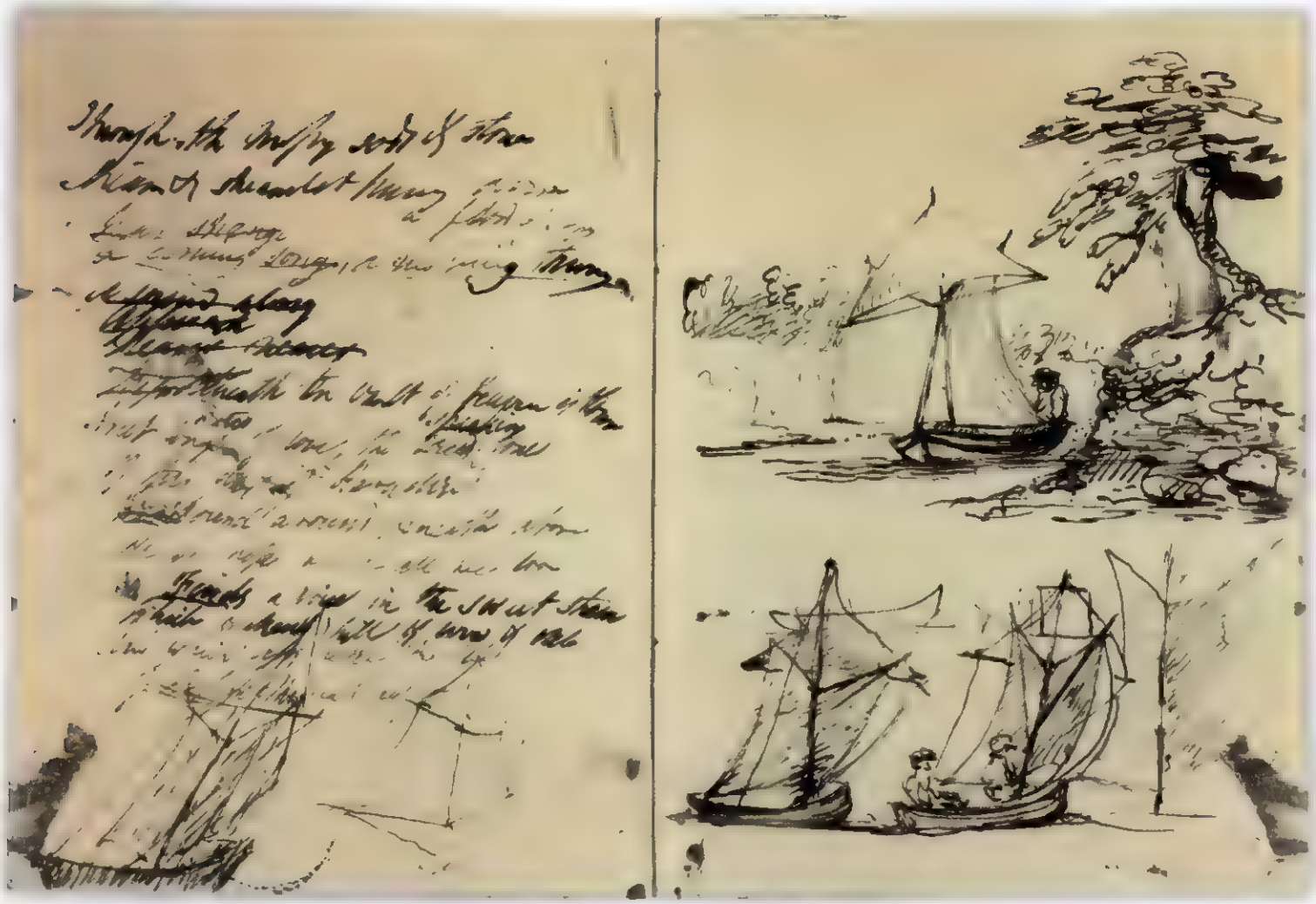
The instrument matters but, for the moment, seize anything. The old fountain pen, so familiar that it nestles like a warm fifth finger in the crook of the thumb, its clip slightly shaky with over-use; the pencil, its lead half-blunt and not quite steady in that smooth cone of wood; the ultra-fine felt tip from the office cupboard, with its no-nonsense simplicity, or the ancient mapping pen, nibbed like a bird's claw, which surely writes only in copperplate, scratching fiercely as it goes. Seize even a ball-point, though its line is mean and thin, and though teachers will tell you that nothing ruins writing faster. Dip, fill or shake vigorously; and write.

For most adults the skill is an instinctive one. Yet cursive handwriting takes a while to master. At primary school our small, wide writing books opened on a forbidding grid of lines, red ones an inch apart, blue ones set close together between them. These cradled the bodies of the letters, while the descenders and ascenders made for the reds like pegs for a washing line. So easily, almost showily, Teacher formed the letter with her black pen: clumsily, with our large sharpened pencils, we tried to follow. It was hard. An "m", "n" or "u" settled cosily between the lines; but "a", with its one flat side, was tricky, and "e" rocked over on its back. Tall letters looked simple, but when one leaned all the rest sloped off towards disaster. The tail of a "p" groped fearfully as it descended through empty space. When a whole line succeeded it looked splendid, like a marching battalion with faint band-music playing, and a gold star shining at the end. If I half-closed my eyes, flicking fast through the pages, the rhythms and patterns arranged themselves in fascinating ways. But once the scaffolding was removed the letters collapsed alarmingly. They still do, unless they have a line to aim for.

At secondary school, surprisingly, we had to learn to write all over again. The teachers found fault with our plain rounded hand; we had to move up to italic now, together with oblique-nibbed pens and dangerously abundant blue ink. Italic was all thicks and thins, diagonal joins and elegant serifs, imposed by nuns who could flick a ruler quicker than an upstroke when faced with a careless piece of work. I came to like the new style for its angularity and boldness, and the way you could dot your "i" with a perfect diamond if you held your pen just right; though it took years to make my backward-sloping letters stand up straight and then lean forward, as both the manuals and the nuns required.

All this took far more effort than tapping a computer keyboard. Writing involves not only the hand and wrist but also the arm, the shoulder, sometimes the whole body. Quill-users were well aware of this, and would choose from the right wing or the left – ideally the third or fourth feather of a goose-wing, but possibly the finest feathers of swans, or >

PHOTOGRAPH **DIVER AGUILAR**



A poet's notebook
"The handwriting of Shelley sometimes approached horizontal in the effort to seize inspiration on the wing"

> ravens, or crows – to make the quill curve towards the hand or away from it, whichever felt more natural. Words could fly that way. Left-handers especially demonstrate the exertion of writing, curling their entire bodies round their pens as they write, smearing their words as they go. Children forming letters sit hunched with concentration, small fingers clenched round crayons, little pink tongues darting out of mouths. After a page or three of writing against the clock, the ablest college student flaps his wrist to ease the ache in it. A script like italic or copperplate is explicitly formed from the shapes made in engraving; pens as they write not only impress the paper, but dig into it, as surely as Sumerians dug their cuneiform letters into tablets of damp clay, or as Roman masons chiselled their magisterial capitals, ancestors of all ours, into the base of Trajan's column. This can be hard physical work; which is perhaps why Gutenberg, when he devised his printing press, was especially keen to boast that no labouring pen had made his blackletter, but a smoothly oiled machine.

Printing did not harm handwriting, though it gradually replaced the calligraphic uncial and gothic of silent, patient monks in their scriptoria. In fact, because it encouraged literacy, printing helped writing to become a more universal skill. Typewriters (though greeted with jeremiads much like this one) did not hurt handwriting too much, because they were used mostly in offices or by sweating beat journalists whose cigarette ash powdered the keys. The rot started when keyboards were allowed, then required, in schools, and when they became small and light enough to slip in a pocket, replacing the notebook and even the jotted to-do list – milk, bread, call garage – which remains, for many people, the greatest boon of writing.

Handwriting is still taught in schools, but in America over the past 50 years the time spent teaching it has fallen dramatically. Though private and charter schools may still make a point of it (as of discipline, and uniforms), many public-school systems are abandoning cursive altogether. Even where taught, it is so soon replaced by typing, for all assignments, that the skill never sets. Teachers tend to agree that most schoolchildren's writing may now be graded "terrible", and is better avoided. From this year the writing test of America's National Assessment of Educational Progress requires composition not on paper, but on a computer.

Pupils remember capitals because they tap at them

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all day on keyboards; many now write with them, unjoined, ungainly and loud as they are, forgetting that the Romans soon abandoned majuscule as laborious and impractical, and that a letter entirely in capitals still bears the mark of the seriously deranged. In 2006 in America, 85% of those who took the handwritten-essay SAT test for college entry preferred to print their letters. Young people are swiftly losing cursive, using it only to sign their names or write the odd cheque. Most signatures, with long use, develop into ciphers or symbols; some of the young, though, now start off that way, appending their personal signs in the form of a spiral or a heart.

Typing (or, now, horribly, "keyboarding") is more convenient. Typing is what we do, all the time, on the marvellous little gizmos we keep in our pockets. Typing is how love is written now, rather than on perfumed notepaper – and presumably that tell-tale e-mail address causes the same leap of the heart as that backward-slanting hand, with its careful serifs and looped "d"s, ever used to do. With typing we can copy, and paste, and search, and deliver a piece of work as polished as if second thoughts and errors had never occurred to us. And, perhaps most important, we can read what we, or others, intended to say.

In the early 19th century, when people corresponded several times a day, quasi-tweeting from hour to hour, quill and pen must have raced across the paper at prodigious speeds

In my days as a medieval historian, I spent much of my time deciphering handwriting. This was where treasure lay, as surely as miniatures nestled like jewels in their orderly setting of black or gothic letters: the unexpected fact, the revelatory connection, truth itself. I came to love the neat, sharp-sided, airy script of 14th-century account books, and to admire the delicately rounded humanistic hand of Renaissance Italian ambassadors. Other hands I dreaded. Faced with a page of crabbed 15th-century notarial scrawl I would have to attack it like a thicket, scanning it for glimpses of light, pushing through the branches of intermeshing ascenders and descenders in case a strange or fascinating word flashed there, like a deer. Some words still refused to reveal themselves. Even when lifted out as if with tweezers, even when magnified and written out afresh, as if copying the action of writing might unlock them, they remained mere patterns without meaning. Perhaps hawk, perhaps handsaw. Somewhere, faintly, a man in a dusty clerk's robe would flick his quill and laugh.

Part of the charm and frustration of handwriting is its scope for ambiguity, and its ability to baffle. Letters that are obvious to us become, to other eyes, a cipher as mysterious as the Rosetta Stone. This can be comic, as the scrawled postcard from Auntie Flo in Blackpool is passed round the supper table (was it the water she rode on last night, or the waiter?). But it is tiring over ten sides on the phenomenology of Hegel, and downright dangerous on a doctor's prescription. It can be tragic, too, as when the lover with only the evidence of a letter tries to interpret, dares not interpret, tries to leave unread, the scrawl that suggests goodbye.

We have come to think of typing as faster than writing. That may or may not be so. Some research suggests that the conjunction of brain and writing hand is possibly more efficient. A study by the University of Washington in 2009 found that schoolchildren wrote faster, and wrote more, when they had to compose essays for ten minutes with pen on paper rather than on computers. The word "cursive" means running; it was invented to avoid time-wasting lifting of the stylus or the pen, with a series of fluid joins and, in the most hectic styles, looping ascenders and descenders. In the early 19th century, when people corresponded several times a day by letter, quasi-tweeting the state of nerves, weather and tea-invitations from hour to hour, quill and pen must have raced across the paper at prodigious speeds. The handwriting of Percy Shelley sometimes approached horizontal in the effort to seize inspiration on the wing. It raced, dived and disappeared like a river under thickets of deletions. In that age of poets, though, the Muse was often hindered by the pen, blunting, splitting, spitting ink or, as John Keats complained, making blind "e"s. The sheer act of writing caused so much frustration that any maker of a primitive computer might have been besieged. And who is to say that the poetry would have been worse?

Whatever the truth of it, handwriting is now consigned, like hand-carried post, to the realm of snails. It is used for special things, for first drafts of books and thank-you notes. It is becoming, like its properly artistic cousin calligraphy, a craft and a rarity, rather than a useful and quotidian skill; in years to come it may, perhaps, be as treasured as the lettering of Imperial China, brushed slowly onto bamboo paper in ink pressed out from jade and pomegranates.

Already the word "handwritten" has acquired a cachet it never had before. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Cadbury and Kellogg used a handwritten logo to sell chocolate and cornflakes, it suggested the founder's personal commitment to quality, a reputation on the line. In the 1970s and 1980s scrawled cursive on record sleeves evoked bands who couldn't be bothered with bourgeois capitalist print, who tossed down titles as they threw out songs, perhaps on the back of a cigarette packet in some soot-stained warehouse studio. Now it suggests care, leisure, individuality and beauty. >

> "Handwritten" is the name of a new fashion range, by Tanya Sarne, that seeks to evoke luxury and craftsmanship. In Britain an online Letter Lounge arranges events around the country, taking over tranquil spots with cupcakes, embroidered cushions and cups of herbal tea while would-be writers ponder what they will write, and how they will write it. It all takes blissful hours. In Britain and America there are now shops, modelled loosely on the Il Papiro chain in Italy, selling nothing but exquisite papers, tiny cork-stoppered bottles of ink, quills and leather-framed blotters and beautiful marbled pens. Customers wander round, scarcely daring to touch.

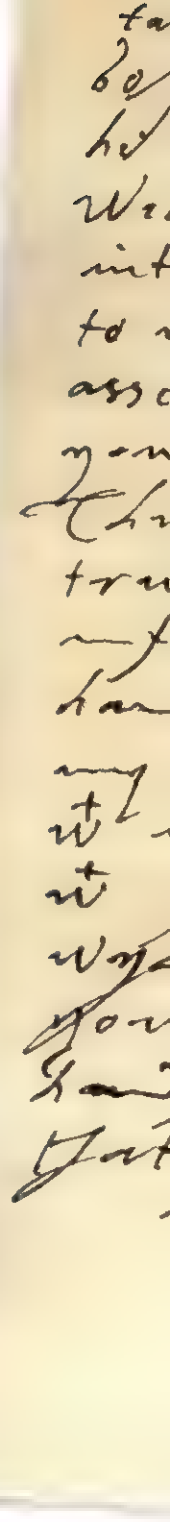
Everything displayed in such shops expresses the idea of handwriting as ritual. It involves an almost sacramental assembling of equipment at the end of which letters, like magic runes, will be conjured from the blank of the page. The very names of Pelikan's gold-chased range of fountain pens, "Majesty", "Ductus" and "Souverän", suggest magisterial acts; the names of letter-writing tablets, Eclats d'Or and Three Candlesticks, Cream Laid and Vergé de France, imply a noble and receptive setting, like a deep-laid carpet. Only ink slums it, a decoction of lamp-black, vitriol, glue and galls.

The fundamental magic of alphabets – that certain signs, gathered in certain permutations, can create and recreate the world – is common to keyboards too, but the gods of alphabets are more properly honoured with paper and pen, seals and sealing wax. Whether anyone actually unscrews a bottle, dips a pen, dares to sully these lovely artefacts with use, is harder to say.

Last year sales of fountain pens in Britain rose by 70%, and sales of quality writing paper at the John Lewis department store in London rose by 79%. Demand for calligraphy classes soared at City Lit, a popular London college. In America the Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association reported that between 1998 and 2004 fountain-pen sales rose from 12m to 17m, and held steady thereafter. But the trend is less healthy than it seems. It is not hard to track down an exquisite luxury fountain pen, or even an antique model, for which the market is still lively; but anecdotal evidence on both sides of the Atlantic suggests that fewer ordinary retailers are stocking the basic Shaeffers and Parker Vectors that Joe Sixpack used once, when everybody wrote by hand. As the basic tools of handwriting disappear from the wall behind the till, so too does the notion that forming letters on paper is a routine way to communicate with other people.

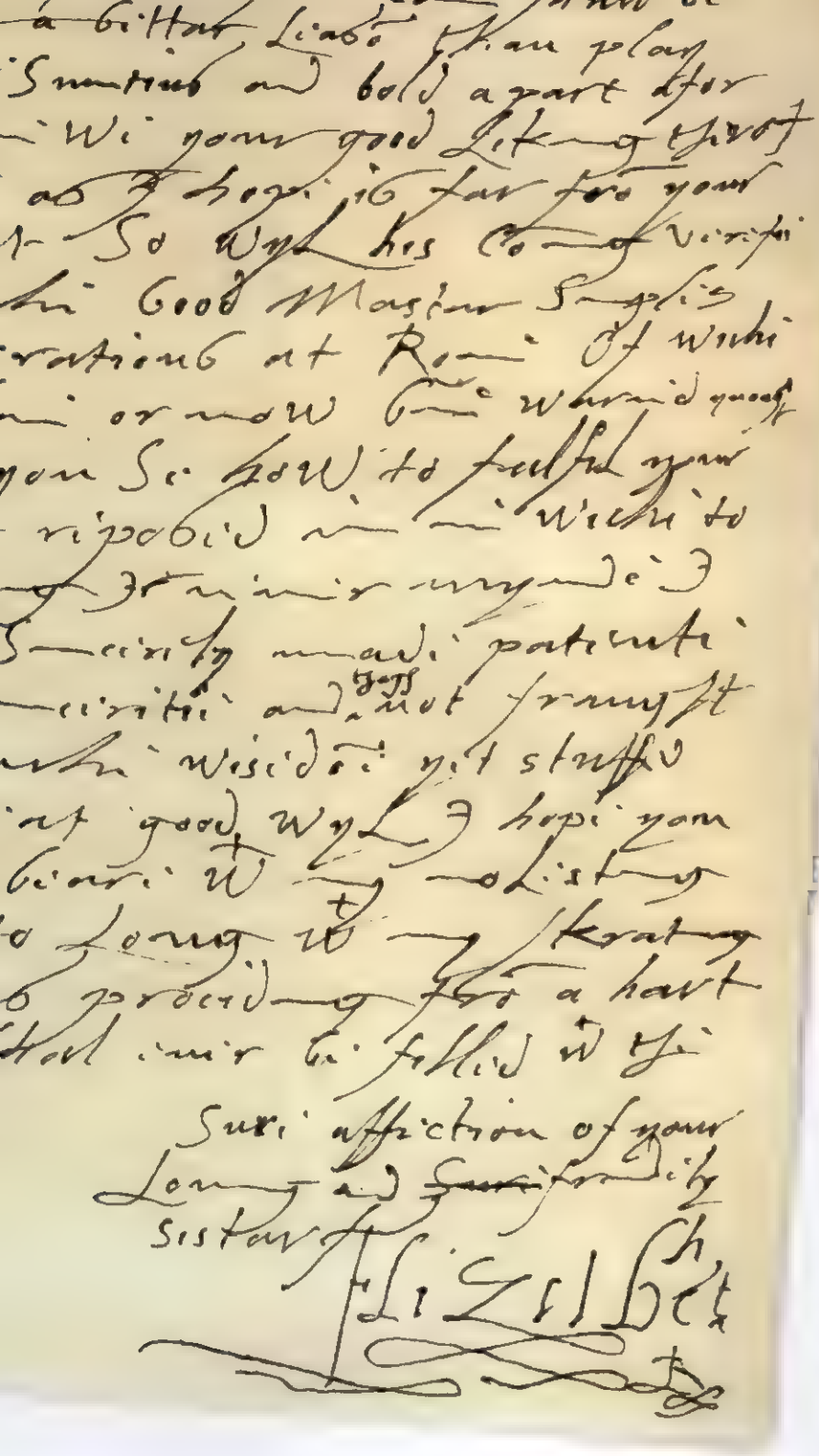
At a pen-and-paper shop that has done business for 50 years in an English university town, business is slow. The manager nonetheless says he has seen an increase, over the 12 years he has been there, in people buying fountain pens. A pen is a statement or fashion accessory now, like cufflinks or a *boutonnière*: slightly nostalgic, slightly pretentious, certainly not everyday. The manager thinks it may be smoothness the customers are after, the sheer relaxation of a good nib after years of stressful, pressing ballpoints (the thinner the pen, the greater the stress) – though whether they will write, or simply doodle and squiggle like artists, is less clear. Luxury pens are bought as presents, though the manager agrees that the would-be user needs to weigh it in his hand first, get the heft and spring of it, try it with this nib and that, send it running over the paper with "thequickbrownfoxjumpsoverthelazydog", to be sure it feels right. He continues to marvel at the different ways people hold pens: straight as a ruler, sideways, clenched in a fist, no two alike. Increasingly, though, they don't know how best to approach the task of making letters. Does he use a fountain pen himself? With a burst of embarrassed laughter, he admits that his first tool is a keyboard.

A fine pen, after all, almost assumes that a lovely hand will flow from it. But most people's handwriting is not beautiful. Very few can aspire to the Renaissance italic script of Niccolò Niccoli or Ludovico Arrighi, perhaps the most elegant ever devised, so pure and pleasing that it became the *fons et origo* not only of the best modern handwriting but of the lower-case typefaces that were then being invented. It was later adopted by William Morris to make his illuminated books in the 19th century, a nice example of progress running backwards. Few today (and perhaps few then) can emulate the lovely italic of the young Elizabeth I, taught to her by Roger Ascham, or the measured copperplate of George Washington. Spiders crawling out of inkwells come closer to what many of us achieve. And we like that, because for all the talk of fluency, balance, harmony and beauty in handwriting – for all the distrust of serifs, curlicues and fussiness in it – it is distinctiveness that we treasure it for: the degree to which it falls away from the copybook, and becomes part of ourselves.



Like a fingerprint, our script expresses us uniquely, and in a way that lasts. The more metaphysically minded might say that it transmits the soul to paper. It is odd that it should, when school writing lessons were meant to make everyone write alike. But within weeks, none of us was writing like anyone else. Only the French, with goodness-knows-what writing drills on their small-squared paper, seem still to impose a rounded, open, characterless national hand.

Handwriting is a personal, intimate thing. Many believe, without much scientific evidence, that creativity is linked to it. Graphologists believe it reveals the character. A forward-sloping hand is said to denote ambition, a backward-



A regal hand
The handwriting of Elizabeth I, in a letter to her successor, James VI of Scotland, written shortly before her death in 1603

sloping one shyness or deceit (a reading that seems hard on left-handers, whose letters naturally tend that way). Looped descenders, they say, mean covetousness, looped ascenders spirituality, unjoined-up letters a surfeit of imagination. The fascination of a literary manuscript lies not only in the deletions and emendations, which show a Wordsworth poem or a Dickens novel in the chaotic making, but also in the clues it seems to offer to the character of the writer, and his or her mood when it was written. A line of poetry that tails off, squashed into the margin and falling downwards, may suggest merely temporary annoyance that the words were too many and the notebook was too small; or it may mean terminal melancholy.

Whatever the substance of graphology, the character is there nonetheless. Though ostensibly silent, a handwritten letter from someone we know speaks with the voice – querulous, joking, ardent, tinged with an accent from Padua or Bulawayo – of its author. Though still, the letters on the page live and breathe as the writer does, crotchety and shaky with old age, hectic with youth, comfortably embracing as a mother. A handwritten envelope (the first we seize on, among the mailouts and bills) announces itself from the doormat as unmistakably as if the sender had walked through the door; and we are accordingly happy or irritated, intrigued or fearful.

Of course, we can talk on Skype now, summoning up the other person before us as though we had rubbed a magic lamp. We don't need to prove our affection or our interest by making signs in ink on paper. It is all too indirect, too dilatory, and rather a performance. Better to communicate straight away, before we get distracted by something else.

And yet. On June 15th the UK Payments Council announced that handwritten cheques would continue to be accepted in Britain as long as needed. Though cheques are declining along with handwriting (their use has fallen by 70% since 1990) there is, as yet, no practical alternative for a private payment. A promise to pay, which is also an appeal for trust and a statement of sincerity, is better written by hand, however clumsily; and once written, it is better signed.

It may be that in decades to come this will be all that survives of common cursive: our monetary promises, and our names. Bearded eccentrics in cluttered attics, and lavender-scented maiden aunts, will continue to practise it, just as there will still be people who bake their own bread or scythe the meadow grass. But many more of us will be laid at last under headstones inscribed with the lovely lettering we almost managed to master for a while, until we decided that scratching our ideas in characters upon a surface was a task too primitive for us. ■

Art director's note *Headline and pull quotes set in P22 Operina, a typeface based on the Renaissance italic script of Ludovico Arrighi*

ALAMY

A whim of iron

John Lloyd is the man behind some of the best television shows of the past 30 years, from "Blackadder" to "QI". Now he is reinventing himself as a novelist and hoping to change the way children learn. A profile by **Charles Nevin**

Somewhere in England it is splendidly an power this fine morning. The village church stands as it has for eight centuries, the cows are only marginally more mobile, and some light mowing is muttering away in the background. But the tranquillity of the English country side has a long tradition of provoking bracing thought from impatient young and eccentric squires; and, although his is a more contemporary calling, John Lloyd is cut from that cloth.

The name might not be familiar, but the output will be. Lloyd is Britain's foremost provider of intelligent popular broadcast entertainment. "The News Quiz" on radio, "Not the Nine O'Clock News", "Spitting Image", "Blackadder", "QI" on television: each in its own way novel, each, in the broadcasting way, daring, and very funny. You will know, too, the names Lloyd has made and abetted along the way: Rowan Atkinson, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Fry, Richard Curtis, Griff Rhys Jones, Pamela Stephenson, Ben Elton, Douglas Adams. As a producer, Lloyd has been headmaster, nurse, analyst, butler, conductor, interpreter, flatterer, complement and chivvier of such talents, many of whom fit that common complaint concerning the talented: "difficult". So you might reasonably expect to meet, up at the manor's old farm house, a master of emollience and small talk, happy to beguile away the time in his anecdotage on a country morning. But Lloyd is not like that: more vicar than squire, intense, in thrall to ideas, the bigger the better, impatient with the complacent.

Lloyd has turned 60 this year, and is pleased to have some spare time, he says, sitting in his garden, because he is about to write a novel: "I've been sitting on it for about 20 years. Actually, it's a trilogy, well maybe five books, I don't know. It's a big subject: everything." Indeed.

PORTRAIT EMMA HARDY

> "John is one of the most intelligent, intense people I've ever known," says John Mitchinson, a publisher living serendipitously in the same village, who has been in on "QI" from the start. "Not exactly an easy person, but incredibly stimulating."

Stephen Fry sends a message putting it his own way: "Impossible, improbable, impish, impious and unimpeachably peachy...John Lloyd stands alone."

"QI" itself is an equally rare, possibly very odd, thing: a friendly parlour-panel game purveying quantum mechanics, philosophy, anthropology and "everything" under the cloak of comedy. It's so detached from the instant simplicities of our twittering times that even the title is an understatement: as well as being a reversal of IQ, it stands for Quite Interesting.

"QI" is the broadcast expression of Lloyd's manically insatiable curiosity, another unfashionable quality in a world where sophistication often involves ennui. " 'QI' is a kind of search for meaning, for what the heck is going on," says Lloyd. "The universe is the most extraordinary thing...even if you just look round this garden and think about the profusion of plants. There are a ridiculous number of plants and every one has got a story. Just in sight of what we can see could be the subject of a lifetime's learning. It's terrifying and marvellous at the same time. 'QI' is a successful television programme and people like it, but I don't understand why it hasn't become a kind of world obsession, like it is with me. We have a load of little mantras at 'QI', one of which is 'Man is born curious but everywhere is bored stiff.' "

He is not a fan of the average dinner party. "There's all this what I call 'moasting', a combination of moaning and boasting, which is what middle-class people do at dinner parties: they complain about the mortgage and the school fees and the trains and the traffic and the government, and then they show off about their holiday in Bali and their new car. It's an absurdly small canvas given that the human brain is the most complex object in the universe, more complicated than a planet.

"Seeing the universe and the world and being alive as odd and wondering about it is something all children do all the time and almost no adults do, locked inside their own personalities worrying about what might happen and regretting what's just happened. And yet inside the back of your head is this massive space, full of thoughts and dreams and fantasies and adventures and tons and tons of information. Look at the skeleton of a gorilla: it's almost indistinguishable from that of a person, and yet we have this mysterious thing, the human brain, with which there's no comparison. But we do have these three animal drives: food, sex and shelter. When we were pitching 'QI', we pointed out that the television was packed with cookery and property programmes, and the internet was awash with sex. But there's a fourth drive. Curiosity. That's what makes us different from bats, porcupines and squirrels. They're curious, but only in ways that affect their survival, looking for nuts or following up interesting smells. As far as we know, only people look up at the sky and think, 'what are all those sparkly things?'. If you don't feed that curiosity, people will die inside...

"We've got aeroplanes and iPhones and we can make intelligent cruise missiles and so forth, but the one thing that hasn't altered in 150,000 years is human nature. Not a jot. You can read the same stuff, with different uniforms and modes of transport, in Homer and Plato that we're still going on about: the things that keep us from becoming supermen – the jealousy and the anger, the things that trap us in the mundane."

This is how it goes on, at pace. Lloyd, being Lloyd, has an insight into the problem of our high promise and consistent failure to deliver it: "I have this theory that if Jung had been born when Newton was born [1643], and Newton had been born when Jung was born [1875], we'd have a much better society, we'd be better at understanding ourselves and our motivations for things. We'd have had 400 years of psychiatry and psychology and only 100 years of technology, so we'd all be these sorted, centred, easy-going, emotionally intelligent people who'd still be wandering around with horses and carts."

Which is a fine thought, in an Oxfordshire garden on a sunny morning. Other thoughts and facts come at will and random. A potato has two more chromosomes than a person and the same number as a gorilla. Why do all plants start off green? The number of people in the history of the world supposed to have achieved the enlightenment prescribed in

PA, REX, BBC

RAISING THE ROOF, LOWERING THE TONE REVIEWS OF LLOYD'S WORK

NOT THE NINE O'CLOCK NEWS
Rowan Atkinson is the funniest thing in "Not the Nine O'Clock News" which is still erratic and fitful but emits at least two beautiful jokes every week. Philip Purser, *Daily Telegraph*, 1979
Pamela and the boys once again raised the roof and lowered the tone. Clive James, *Observer*, 1982

SPITTING IMAGE
This isn't satire. It's Punch and Judy for adults. Hugh Hebert, *Guardian*, 1985
[It] may one day tell...as much about attitudes in 1988 as the drawings of Gilray, Hogarth and Rowlandson tell us about the 18th century today. Christopher Dunkley, *Financial Times*, 1988
A programme of embarrassing awfulness now almost entirely given over to fourth-form smut. Peter Barnard, *Times*, 1994

Eastern philosophy is 14. And isn't it remarkable that the big management consultants have higher profit margins than the companies they are advising?

Thus the guiding philosophy of "QI": that everything is interesting if examined in the right way. Even dinner parties? "Yes, once you get away from repeating the same old stuff. It's not that difficult, finding out something interesting. You've just got to use your curiosity, stimulate it." And then he's off again, talking about a recent holiday, in Scotland, fishing. "There was a copy of the *Field* in the house. It had a fantastically interesting piece on blackcurrants, which I've never considered before. Do you know that 90% of all the blackcurrants grown in Britain go into Ribena? Isn't that an absolutely marvellous piece of information? And they contain four times more vitamin C than oranges."

"IT WASN'T ALWAYS like this, you know," says Lloyd. "I was just a normal ambitious television producer trying to win more BAFTA awards than anybody else." Normally ambitious, perhaps, but not otherwise. "Sometimes people imagine that really clever chaps are two a penny in broadcasting," says Alan Yentob, the BBC's creative director. "In fact, there are only a very few you can point to who have made a difference. John is one. It's catalytic, too: he has enabled a whole tier of talent to emerge. With 'Not the Nine O'Clock News', he mentored great writing and performing talent. 'Blackadder' was historical but relevant to how we live today, playful with the form as well as full of ideas. Not since 'That Was the Week That Was' had a satire show been as popular as 'Spitting Image', and there hasn't been one since. He was the enabler of all this, able to work with talented and quite difficult people – in a good sense – able to see their potential and move them on."

Lloyd is from an Anglo-Irish family; his father was in the Royal Navy, his great-uncle was an international polo player and a decorated brigadier-general. He went to an ancient English private school, King's, Canterbury, and on to Cambridge, and followed the traditional if casual career path (met a man in a pub) from the Footlights into BBC light entertainment. He started with radio, where he worked with the always challenging Douglas Adams (another Footlights man) on "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" before moving to television with "Not the Nine O'Clock News", the BBC's return to satire, in 1979, which happily coincided with the arrival of the most relishable, cherishable satirical butt of the century, Margaret Thatcher, and made stars out of Griff Rhys Jones, Mel Smith, Pamela Stephenson and Rowan Atkinson.

"The sort of person who you want to work with when you're doing comedy is someone who pisses himself laughing, and that's John," says Stephenson. "We knew it was good because John loved it and was jumping up and down...he sparked and sparked off everybody." It was while searching for fresh ideas for them that he came across the puppet caricatures of Peter Fluck and Roger Law; and so was born "Spitting Image", an artful combination of 18th-century grotesque and 20th-century wit. To both programmes, Lloyd brought comic perfectionism and the ability to achieve it with charm and stamina: what Roger Law calls his "whim of iron".

"He knows his comedy," Law says, "he's interested in ideas, and he was never one to allow his imagination to be limited by practicalities. He rang up one Friday demanding ten camel puppets for the Sunday. I told him I hadn't any, so he said, 'Well, haven't you got a horse or two, or cows? Just put humps on them.' But if you'd got a problem, Lloydie would be there. He'd still be at the end of the phone at two in the morning."

Jon Plowman, former BBC head of comedy and executive producer of "The Office", says: "What's John's secret? He never does anything that he doesn't believe in, and he is a brilliant writer and then re-writer of jokes, verbal and visual... 'Not the Nine O'Clock News' and 'Spitting Image' were great not just because of what was in them but because of what had been thrown out by John. They revolutionised comedy... It could be said that it was John who made comedy the 'new rock'n'roll', not those who came later."

In 1983 Lloyd moved on to "Blackadder", a novel and changing sitcom which followed the fortunes through history of various reincarnations of Edmund Blackadder, leading member of a noble line of scoundrels. Largely written by Rich- >

BLACKADDER
It is a pleasure to see the corrosive disdain gather behind Rowan Atkinson's eyes like a boil. Well, two boils...Blackadder is back, this time in the Regency period as gentleman's gentleman to the first gentleman of Europe.
Nancy Banks Smith, *Guardian*, 1987

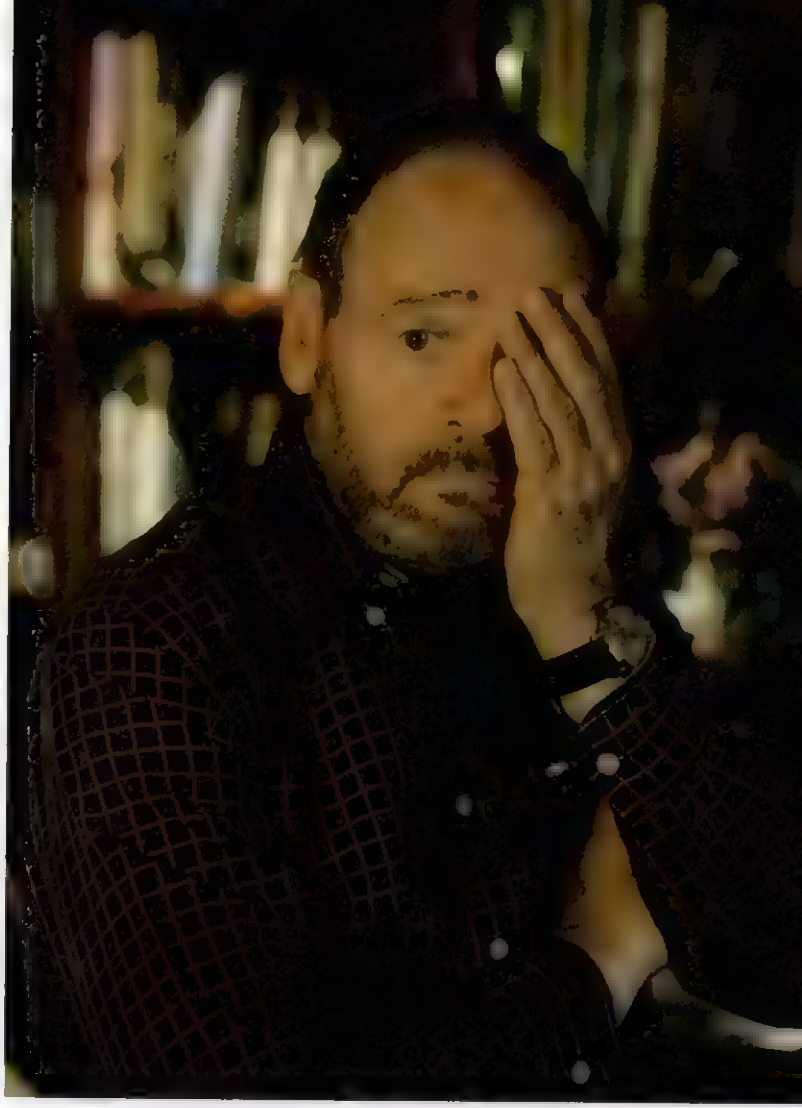
QI
A stream of frothy banter, laced with anecdotes.
Paul Hoggart, *Times*, 2003
Intellectually smutty. Mary Novakovich, *Guardian*, 2003
As granny always said, smartarses will be smartarses.
Paul Hoggart, *Times*, 2004
The premise is like a recipe for a truly tiresome dinner party.
Nicholas Spencer, *FT*, 2006

Research by Victoria Beale

> ard Curtis and Ben Elton, it was made for Rowan Atkinson, whose famous features vividly relayed the fawning, disdain, irritation, cowardice and cunning demanded by Elizabethan courts and Flanders trenches. It was also triumphant proof that comic history didn't automatically require Kenneth Williams mugging, Sid James sniggering and more than one entendre. Tony Robinson, eternally Baldrick, Blackadder's Sancho and stooge, remembers hours and hours of Lloyd worrying away at scripts and scenes, of seeming anarchy in rehearsal and no idea of what the next scene would be except "a lot of people saying very funny things", until another Lloyd quality, a businesslike discipline, kicked in at the last minute: "That's the price you pay for working with someone who's a genius."

But perhaps the best way to demonstrate Lloyd's ability to take comedy beyond comedy is to look at two of his finest moments, both readily available online: "Spitting Image" greeting the Thatcher election victory in 1987 with a young blond chap carrying a bowler and umbrella singing Kander and Ebb's Hitler-Jugend parody from "Cabaret", "Tomorrow Belongs to Me", while senior Conservatives drink foaming steins of lager in the Bastardgarten; and the final scene of "Blackadder", in which the cast both do and don't go over the top with a poignancy only comedy can lend.

By 1990, although not quite 40, Lloyd had received a Lifetime Achievement Award from BAFTA. He had been asked by successive BBC director-generals to run their entertainment department. And he had become Britain's leading television ad director, winning six more BAFTAS for his commercial work, including Barclaycard ads with Rowan Atkinson, and Abbey National with a coming comedian, Alan Davies.



AND THEN IT all started to go wrong. "I got very stuck in my early 40s because I'd won all the prizes. I had money and children and the house in the country. I had everything the material world could throw at me, and I woke up one Christmas Eve and I couldn't see the point of anything. I used to have all my awards on the wall of my office – 'Look at me! I've won these! – and I just suddenly thought: 'This is insane: it's a hundred pieces of cardboard in frames: what's the point of that? And what am I supposed to do with the rest of my life?' I was desperate. I got fantastically depressed...I used to get depressed before: it's like getting a migraine, you can feel that fuzz coming along. But this was like being hit by a shovel. I literally used to sit under the desk, crying, just desperate."

His career began to stutter: "It was a very odd thing, until 1991, I'd had this 15 years of flawless work...and then, for about ten years, nothing worked. Absolutely nothing. I was fired from ads I'd created. I wrote a movie for Hollywood and the head of the studio threw it in the swimming pool because it was late: everything went wrong. I had a powerful sense of being bullied by a giant bear, and every time I tried to pick myself up, I was smacked down again. It was really uncanny and it wasn't just being depressed."

You can see that Lloyd is prone to neither self-protection nor false modesty. The way he dealt with his crisis reinforces the view, supported by both Mitchinson and Yentob, that despite working in a modern medium, he is an old-fashioned figure, from the 18th century or earlier, a time before knowledge was put into compartments, when wanting to know everything was admired as natural philosophy. There was no rush to outside analysis; rather, there were long walks, a good deal of whisky, and the start of a quest. "What was ridiculous was that I didn't have anything to be depressed about, and that maddened me. There are not many qualities I admit to, but I am very, very determined. And I really don't like to be in a position where there isn't an answer. So I set out to look for the meaning of life. I started reading about physics, which I didn't know anything about...from physics I got into maths and Pythagoras and so into Greek and Roman philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian mysticism..."

His appetite for winning awards was replaced by an abiding passion for fact-collecting. He began, too, to enjoy rather than be irked by the incorrigible questioning of his three young children. From all this was born both succour and "QI", together with the realisation that the questions are more

interesting than the answers, particularly as we don't have any to most of them. "You have to let go, to realise you can't know everything. Another of the mantras at 'QI' is 'embrace your ignorance': once you know how really ignorant you are, you can relax." The relaxation is relative, of course: Lloyd is the only person I've interviewed who has a cigarette break and paces around worrying about how well it's going, out loud.

Some don't buy into "QI" entirely, warming less than others to the classroom ethos, the cosy guying of teacher Fry's apparent omniscience, and his coy reaction to it; there is, they say, an over-confidence in the uniqueness of the exercise, a little too much conceit at the conceit. But they are a minority; and Fry, after all, is much loved, what the British like to dub, almost completely seriously, a "national treasure", along with such as Dame Judi Dench and Sir David Attenborough. There is no doubting, either, the entertaining cleverness of the show, the ease with which the viewer is drawn in. Trivia leads to something more testing; the Everyman, common man, jester, Alan Davies, plays oik to Fry's toff chairman, licensing our ignorance and excusing his own with curiosity and humour.

"I'm a conduit for the audience," says Davies, who recounts – "if I've got this right" – Lloyd's view that comedians share with great thinkers the ability to make original connections. Illumination through humour is the common denominator and unifying principle of Lloyd's work. "You're lucky if you have one idea," he says, "and mine is that by making people laugh you can make all sorts of subjects interesting that don't appear interesting. Comedy is very good in that way because it's so difficult to make people laugh aloud that it makes you think very hard about all sorts of things. I tried to do it with news with 'The News Quiz', 'Not the Nine O'Clock News' and 'Spitting Image'. 'Blackadder' is a way of looking at history more interestingly, and 'QI' tries to do it about everything."

" 'QI' is John's way of making a contribution," says Alan Yentob. "It's his big idea of public-service broadcasting, to some extent mirroring his frustration with what was going on in television. He saw the opportunity to marry entertainment with intelligent inquiry. For him, it's a way of life and a way of thinking, more than just a programme."

Quite: the QI company employs "four and a half people", including two full-time researchers, or "elves", as the QI way has it. Lloyd's wife, Sarah, a former publishing director of Century Books, is managing editor. Lloyd's advertising arm, QI Commercials, helps with funding. In the past ten years, "by working like maniacs", they have produced 125 television shows, 24 radio shows (the Radio 4 equivalent of "QI", "The Museum of Curiosity"), ten books and annuals, and 200 "QI" columns for the *Daily Telegraph*. "QI" is repeated round the clock on Dave, a British cable channel; a Swedish version is at the pilot stage; the books have been translated into 32 languages. America continues to resist, but what might appear a far tougher proposition, Australia, has cheerily succumbed, to the extent that Lloyd, Fry and Davies are there this autumn performing the first "QI" stage show.

The QI Club in Oxford, the embodiment of Lloyd's philosophy, with talks, concerts, stand-up comedy, poker and bridge, didn't last, "a huge success in every way, except financially", but he continues to proselytise with talks and presentations, and there are plans and visions for "QI" documentaries, a movie, even a school. "Schools should be like a giant 'QI' lesson all the time," says Lloyd. "We should educate them by astounding them. I know 13-year-old boys who have seen every show twice and know the books off by heart: children know that 'QI' is revolutionary. Adults think it's a bit of fun. The crossest people are the professors – the medievalists, and the chemists who point out that bit about the enzyme isn't quite so simple – but that's not what 'QI' is for: it's not an encyclopedia or a university department, it's there to stimulate. To get people to think for themselves. To wake them up a bit from the torpor of boredom and the passive acceptance of what they are told. If children were taught like this, they would quickly develop the ability to think originally, to question everything, even what they are formally 'taught'. Great teachers would welcome it, because they too would learn something new every day."

Yentob is right about Lloyd's frustration with broadcasting today. "QI" has now returned to a more relaxed late-night slot on BBC2, after three series on BBC1 in the early evening, where it took on the mighty soap "Coronation Street", and regularly lured a million viewers from it. But his major complaint is the condescending belief that the supposedly inferior tastes of the audience can be satisfied by programmes created from a formula: "It's the infection in our culture that great ideas are accessible to some sort of measurement, that a focus group would have come up with the general theory of relativity much more quickly." Which made it all the more satisfying that the first programme back on BBC2 drew more viewers than Channel 5's launch of "Big Brother".

"It's there to stimulate. To wake people up from the torpor of boredom and passive acceptance"

Others, on a sunny morning in an Oxfordshire garden, might relax and admire their own aperçus. Lloyd continues to disturb the calm with a consequent and larger argument. "What we've got now is 'he who dies with the most toys wins'. It's about money and acquisition...you won't get anywhere until you realise that it's this negative side of human nature that needs to be addressed in some radical way and educated out of us right from the beginning. We need to educate parents how to be parents...We've got an obsession with fixing things, but it's fixing us that we need to spend some time on. And that's what 'QI' tries to do in its small way: it's waving this little flag rather futilely in the darkness and saying, 'Look, if everybody was interested...' " ■

EMMA HARDY

AUTHORS ON MUSEUMS

The wings of Capri

The Villa San Michele is a monument to one man's obsession with light, death and classical remains. The novelist Ali Smith feels her spirits lift as she explores the borderlands between fact and fantasy

EARLIER THIS YEAR I stood in the sculpture loggia at the Villa San Michele in Anacapri, and I didn't just look a god in the eye, I poked a god in the eye. Even better: I cleaned out the eye of a god. I leaned forward under the green bronze head of a Mercury looking down at me, one wing spread open on the side of his head, and removed a small piece of cobweb from the hollow of one of his eyes.

Then I stepped back and wrote in my notebook, "maybe one of the few museums in the world still able to let you be human around its exhibits." I wrote, and then I realised the table I was leaning on was an exhibit too, a table I'd actually read about, knew a story about. Its surface, a slab of beautiful inlaid fragments of multi-coloured marble, was the opposite side of a piece of rough stone used as a washboard for decades, maybe centuries, by Sicilian washerwomen. One day at the end of the 19th century Axel Munthe, the man who built and put this house together, saw the women doing their washing. The next time he passed them he brought a brand-new turn-of-the-20th-century washboard, jumped out of his carriage and offered it in exchange for the slab. The women were delighted.

Now, more than 100 years later, I was leaning on it, and nobody was running to tell me not to. Was the story about this table true? So many of Munthe's stories about the history of the contents of his villa are, shall we say, a bit dubious. This head of Mercury, for instance, eyeing me now. A spider-eaten piece of worthless junk? Or something really truly old?

It didn't matter – or rather, it wasn't what mattered. I was high up on Capri, whose rearing rock bluffs rise out of the sea into a choreography of cloud and cliff, a never-ending shape-shift between mist and revelation. Now you see, and now you don't. Capri has a way of letting you see differently. A "dreaming sphinx", Munthe noted in his travel journal in 1885; that's what the poets called Capri, an "antique sarcophagus". A sarcophagus? All this light, all this greenness and air and life? The most beautiful place I've ever been, in a vast fall of sky and sea of a blue not even Giotto could equal: an old tomb?

Munthe was a doctor, a man who'd lost count of >

PHOTOGRAPHS **ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH**

Blind trust
No alarms went off when Ali Smith reached up to this statue of Mercury and cleaned out his eyes

> the mounting corpses of the poor in the Naples cholera epidemic. He first came to this bright island as a very young man, aged 19, in 1876, under the shadow of consumption. So Death isn't just a concept, it's a character with a capital D in Munthe's "The Story of San Michele" (1929). This charming, irascible, rich, mad and funny memoir went on to be translated into about 40 languages and to sell 25m copies. It made Munthe and his villa world-famous, though it's really more shaggy-dog than true, and more about his young life as a doctor and psychiatrist in Paris and Rome than it is about this place, the old house and ruined chapel on the site of a Tiberian villa, which he bought from the local carpenter in 1895 and transformed into the Villa San Michele. It sits on a cliff edge over which, according to legend, the Roman emperor Tiberius liked to tip the boys, girls, men and women he'd finished with and watch them fall. The view over the Bay of Naples, Sorrento and Vesuvius is a thing of near-shocking beauty.

Munthe wanted to make a home "open to sun and wind and the voice of the sea, like a Greek temple, and light, light, light everywhere". But he was a man with a lifelong eye problem; the brightness of Anacapri would be a kind of torture to him for the 40 years he lived here. So he had darker glasses made, bought a shady old tower for when San Michele would be too much, and set to work. "The whole garden was full of thousands and thousands of polished slabs...all now forming the pavement of the big loggia, the chapel and some of the terraces. A broken cup of agate of exquisite shape, several broken and unbroken Greek vases, innumerable fragments of Roman sculpture...came to light...While we were planting the cypresses bordering the little lane to the chapel, we came upon a tomb with the skeleton of a man, he had a Greek coin in his mouth, the bones are still there where we found them, the skull is lying on my writing table."

His book is a cheeky, headlong mess of arrogance and modesty, a northern magic-realism transposed on the hot south, all dreams, tall stories, garrulous ghosts. Written between the world wars, picking its way across "the dangerous No Man's Land between fact and fancy", it opens with flowers and beautiful girls and ends with a paean to the songs and the wings of birds. From beginning to end it's a revelation both of Munthe's spirit and his tendency to make truth up as he went along. He built the villa by eye, he swears, without an architect (this isn't true: the architect's plans are in the house's archives). He found the great granite statue of the sphinx, which gazes out to sea at the garden's outermost point, by following a panpipe-playing shepherd in a dream (there's a receipt for the sphinx in the house's archives; it came from a Naples antiques dealer). As he says, near the start: "I do not ask for better than not to be believed."

Light and shade
ABOVE The atrium expresses Munthe's desire that his home be "open to sun and wind, like a Greek temple"
BELOW The Venetian Salon

Unbelievable, larger than life, and a maker of life itself into something larger, he was the kind of man who'd buy a mountain just to stop the practice of bird-snaring on it. (Capri is a resting spot for the world's migratory birds; thanks to the animal-loving, bird-revering Munthe the hill above Villa San Michele, for centuries a hub of quail hunt and bloodsport, is now an important bird sanctuary.) An expert in the manipulation of the lethargic rich, he was also a volunteer in the outbreaks of cholera and typhus among the poor. A foreigner taken to heart by the locals, he was more intimate than a doctor should really be with his most illustrious patient, Victoria, the crown princess, later queen, of Sweden. He made his name via the rich and famous, refused money from the impoverished, and was happy to be paid, as he once was, in the shape of a full-grown, alcohol-dependent baboon.

Over the years the villa, with its eccentric mix of "dug-up" or "found" Roman and Greek artefacts and its hotchpotch of royalty, locals, dogs, cats, hens, dipsomaniac monkeys and resident mongoose, became a place of fashionable pilgrimage. Henry James called it "a creation of the most fantastic beauty, poetry and inutility I have ever seen clustered together". Oscar Wilde came, not long out of prison (Munthe was among the few across Europe to be kind to him). Rilke visited. The famously unsociable Garbo actually volunteered herself for a visit ("surprisingly nice", Munthe noted). History itself visited in all its contemporary guises, with Stefan Zweig consulting Munthe on the best ways to commit suicide and Hermann Goering consulting him about buying the Villa (Munthe politely refused). On his death in 1949 he left the building, its gardens and the mountain behind to the Swedish state, and now as well as this glorious museum, bird sanctuary and a huge open-air concert space for Anacapri, it houses a near-paradisal colony of studios with fellowships for Swedish artists.

I FIRST CAME here in November 1995; I had just won some money in a short-story competition, and because I was thinking of maybe writing something about Pompeii (it would turn out to be my first novel), my partner and I came to visit the remains and look in the mouth of the volcano. One day on a whim we caught the ferry from Sorrento to Capri, where Gracie Fields and Graham Greene had both lived, which was pretty much all I knew about it. We arrived in the Marina Grande, small and excitingly ramshackle. There was a funicular railway running up the side of the mountain, so we got on. Then we boarded a bus which took

us up a ribbon of road too small for a bus and let us off in a tiny white village square. We followed our noses down a shop-lined road, and came to a Moorish-looking building. In we went – by chance exactly 100 years after Munthe bought the land from Master Vincenzo, the carpenter.

I remember being intrigued by it, loving it. Now, 16 years later, I'm coming back for the first time. It's warm, somewhere between spring and summer, and I'm older, if not much wiser, in that I think I know where I'm going and what I'm likely to see there: a sphinx or two, a beautiful garden, a house full of fragments, a really amazing view. It's a place that the writer Bruce Chatwin compared to Pasadena and Beverly Hills for its cheap gaudiness; a rich man's play-place from the turn of the last century, Chatwin thought.

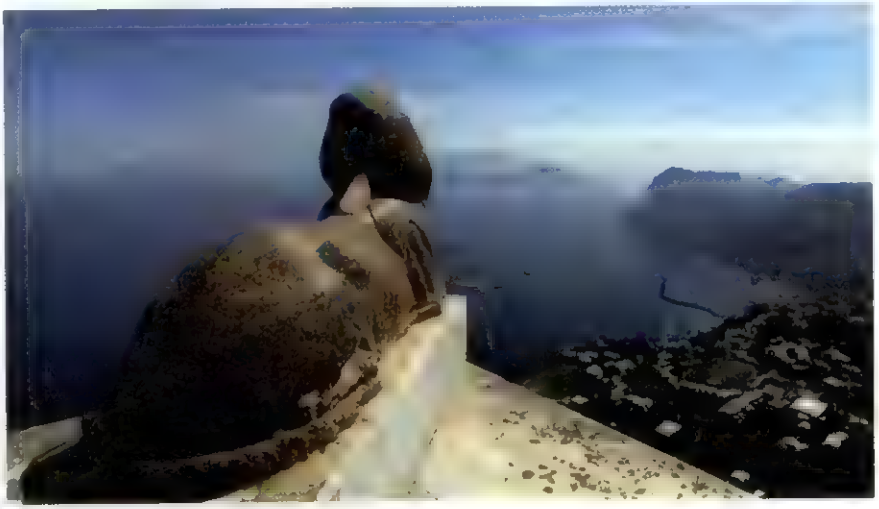
But something a bit beyond me is already happening. The ferry journey from Naples to Capri has left my chest feeling more open. I hadn't actually noticed it was closed.

Now everywhere, all through the pristine old house, I can't help seeing things with wings, Mercury after Mercury, and not just Mercuries, there are winged fragmented feet, winged beings, winged heads, the stone-carved wings of birds in the old fragments fixed into the walls. Then as I walk through the house and out towards the statues and garden what happens, in a word, is birdsong.

It's as if the air is electrically alive with it. It's like hearing your own ear waken. I move back into the study for a moment. A lot of people walk past me – one of the curious things about the Villa San Michele is that although it's pretty busy, nothing feels crowded – and I listen, first to the birdsong at the back of everything, then to what the people say, in all the languages, every time the house springs its surprise of openness and light on them. Oh. Look.

That's what it's like to visit the Axel Munthe Museum. You walk through a hall, a kitchen, a bedroom, a study, a place to live that's lined and scattered with fragments of art, junk, beauty, history. Then you find yourself on a path that gets lighter and lighter; then art, junk, history, home, trees, stone, leaves and sky all shift together on the edge of a view so open that it renews the very word view itself. I'm laughing at my own inadequacy, at the inadequacy of memory, but most of all at how cunning this place is, making you open your eyes, ears, senses, leading you through from space to open space until finally you hit it, it hits you – a kind of blue infinity, an epitome of openness.

I walk up the path. Two French kids dodge past me. Birdsong and laughter. I go and visit the old red



Heads and tales
TOP Visitors are never quite sure whether the sculptures in the loggia are priceless treasures or worthless junk.
ABOVE Munthe claimed he first met this sphinx in a dream

and black granite sphinx overlooking the bay, the one Munthe found "in a dream". I run my hand over her shiny flank. You can't see her face unless you're a bird. I double back and visit the other, the little Etruscan winged sphinx silhouetted against the sheer drop; the lichen growing on this sphinx is a very bright yellow and the ships below her and all the houses on the mountain are nothing but tiny white flecks, the size of flakes of sea salt. I come back through the sculpture loggia; the bowed heads of the busts are ceremonious, resigned. I revisit Munthe's study, with the huge stone head of Medusa above his writing desk. His dictionary, Swedish-English, is open at the words for "closeness", "charlatan", "remains".

A sprightly elderly lady sits down near me for a moment, to get her breath. She tells me she is from >

> Holland and that she read "The Story of San Michele" 50 years ago and loved it, then read it again six years ago and decided, finally, to come. Why did she wait 50 years? She shrugs. "Life comes," she says. Four children, a husband, 40 years as a doctor herself, then the body gets old. She hits at one of her swollen-looking feet with her walking stick. She tells me her name is Marijke, and that the writing room is her favourite place. She likes what he says about how we should eat, drink, be merry, "but he was dark too, a misanthrope". You think? I say. "I think, you know, he was in a relationship with death," she says. We both look over at the huge grave Medusa head on the wall.

Munthe claimed he had found the Medusa at the bottom of the sea. Somewhere over time it's lost its snakes, its eyebrows, even one of its eyelids. Today it's garlanded with fresh ivy, very green, very alive.

Maybe he wanted to be turned to stone, I say. Marijke makes a small gesture that takes in all the stonework around us. She shrugs, gets to her feet, smiles, shakes my hand and goes out into the light.

It reminds me of something Shirley Hazzard says in her sparkling memoir about this island and about her friend Graham Greene, "Greene on Capri". She quotes from an Italian novel, something she thinks is true not just about being here, in this almost unbearably beautiful place, but about Greene, his art, and the business of being human. "Human beings need unhappiness at least as much as they need happiness." The mercurial Munthe, the old charlatan, knew the shifts and contraries of it, I think, standing here in this little piece of Sweden in Italy, this piece of the north in the south with its garden full of tourists where you can still, regardless, feel solitary and unhurried, its museum without labels, freed up from all the categories. He brings the sky into the house, turns you towards a horizon, suggests that "real" and "fake" is missing the point. He understood – above all from his own troubled eyesight – that in a place of such brightness, colour and light, the riddle more than ever involves the dark. He didn't want museumry, he wanted the puckish act, the live shape-shift, the act of the imagination. That's what this place built on its cliff-edge is about. So I was standing next to Mercury, god of thieves, artists, storytellers, communication, the underworld path between the dead and the living. There was a cobweb; it looked like quite a fresh one. Would anyone mind, I wondered, if I reached up and removed it?

I poked my finger into the hollow eye of the god. Then I went out to take one more look at infinity. ■

Villa San Michele *V. le Axel Munthe 34, Anacapri; villasanmichele.eu. Open Monday to Sunday from 9am, closing time during high season, May to September, 6pm. Admission €6.*

THE PLAYLIST

Stairway to heaven

Which songs are the best for learning the guitar? **David Sinclair**, critic and bandleader, takes his pick

It can be a tedious business learning the guitar. Repeating scales, exercises or chord shapes is heavy going. But if you can figure out the basic chords of a song that you really love, your motivation soars. And if you can get hold of a riff that makes you feel like an instant guitar hero, nothing will stop you going back to those fretboard shapes again and again. No wonder the staff in one guitar shop banned customers from playing "Smoke on the Water". Here are some cool songs every guitarist should be able to play, in ascending order of difficulty.

THE GEORGIA SATELLITES BATTLESHIP CHAINS (**all songs on iTunes unless stated**)
They say the best rock'n'roll songs are built on no more than three chords. This one uses just two – C and G – to underpin a tremendous, romping groove and a singalong tune.

THE ROLLING STONES HI-HEEL SNEAKERS (YouTube)
Once you've made it to three chords, it's time to play the blues. The Stones' version of this Tommy Tucker song uses the classic 12-bar sequence of A, D and E. It is the perfect key and tempo to practise the rocking finger movement that underpins all blues/boogie song layouts.

BOB DYLAN ALL I REALLY WANT TO DO
Dylan was a master at turning a simple chord sequence into the backdrop for a sparkling tune. This one uses just D, A and E – although the changes come fairly quickly and it is in 3/4 time.

AXIS OF AWESOME 4 CHORDS (YouTube)
The fourth chord buys you an astonishing collection of songs. In this ear-opening video you will discover how to play "Man in the Mirror", "With or Without You", "Take on Me", "Waltzing Matilda", "Torn", "Let it Be", "Under the Bridge", "You're Beautiful" and many more. They all use the same chord progression – E, B, C#m, A in this demonstration, but easily transposed to the key of your choice.

DEEP PURPLE SMOKE ON THE WATER
Obvious but essential. This riff is easy to master, which accounts for its ubiquity. But beware. Ritchie Blackmore played it without a plectrum, to get that rich, thick texture.

NIRVANA SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT
Another instantly recognisable power-chord riff, often heard ringing out from the doorways of musical-instrument shops. Fast changes and a springy feel, but a remarkably simple and symmetrical sequence.

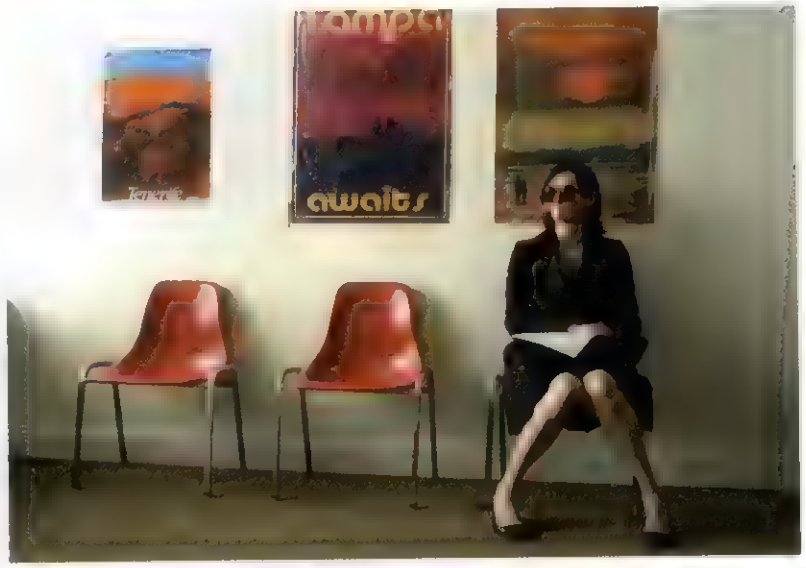
PJ HARVEY THE LAST LIVING ROSE
Harvey uses a capo on the fifth fret to play this haunting Am-C-F-C sequence, thereby avoiding any troublesome bar chords. Her remedial strumming technique is readily imitated. The poetic imagery – which helped her to win the Mercury prize this year, for the second time – less so.

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE KILLING IN THE NAME
A power riff for the connoisseur. The fingering is straightforward, the timing more involved. It is notable for the Drop D tuning – a popular trick among modern rock guitarists. The bottom E string is tuned down a tone to D, lending a touch of authentic heaviosity.

PAOLO NUTINI JENNY DON'T BE HASTY
Nutini's guitarist, Donny Little, taught me this ingenious riff. The trick is to hammer on a suspended 7th on the A shape which follows hard on the first F#m chord. There's also neat use of an E shape with an Ab dragged on to the bottom string late in the chorus. Very satisfying when you finally nail it.

Ian Jack *At the cinema*

"We Need to Talk About Kevin" has been turned into an immaculate film – at times too immaculate



IS IT NATURE or nurture? Or, as the question for book groups at the end of Lionel Shriver's novel has it, "Was Kevin just born wicked, or is his cold heart the inevitable consequence of an unaffectionate mother?" The novel, "We Need to Talk About Kevin", never answers the question. That's its compulsion. Kevin's mother is the narrator and everything we get to know is from her point of view as, in a series of letters to her absent husband, she frets over the origins of their son's monstrousness. But how reliable is her account? Is she being too easy on herself or too hard? It may be that certain kinds of behaviour – in this case, Kevin's inexplicable murder spree at his American high school – defy the cause-and-effect reasoning of child-rearing manuals. The word "evil" may just have to do.

Lynne Ramsay's film is as faithful as probably any adaptation could be to the novel's ambiguity and, also like the novel, it tells the story retrospectively. The opening sequence shows crowds revelling in what looks like blood, dripping in it, almost swimming in it, until certain seedy and pulpy textures in the red mess give us a hint of salad and sauces. No explanation is offered, but this in fact is documentary footage of La Tomatina, the Spanish tomato festival, standing in for a nightmare. When Kevin's mother Eva (Tilda Swinton) wakes up we find her in a shabby little house somewhere in the outer suburbs of New York. There's still no escaping the colour of blood. Vengeful neighbours have smeared red paint across her walls and her car. Again and again, we see her trying to sponge, rub and chip it off; Lady Macbeth had a similar preoccupation with hand washing.

No marks for spotting the symbolism. Eva is being made to atone for the bloody sins of her son, who now languishes sullenly in prison while she tries to cope with her unrelieved loneliness, oppressive guilt and the hatred of the bereaved. Kevin has killed 11 people who did him no harm. She, who may well have done, is not among his victims. Flashbacks, if the word can be applied to a film so fidgety and initially confusing in its tenses, recount Kevin's life from the moment of his conception. A man and woman briefly couple and spermatozoa swim towards their destination while a flashing bedside clock counts the seconds: this is the method and time it took to produce Mahatma Gandhi on the one hand or Josef Stalin on the other – and all it takes for Kevin to come into the world and somehow take against it.

Tilda Swinton is entirely persuasive as a travel writer who chafes against the restrictions of motherhood, her characterisation helped by a whippet physique that's the opposite of maternal amplitude. John C. Reilly is good, too, as the well-meaning and unperceptive husband who thinks Kevin is just fine – shucks, after all he's just a typical boy! Kevin himself emerges as beautiful as a butterfly from the ugly chrysalis of his obstinate, disobedient childhood: you want to hit him, his mother does. Ezra Miller, who plays his final incarnation as a teenager, gives a wonderful portrait of unreachable malignity, in which the insufferable attitudes (as well as the charm) of your average 15-year-old boy are magnified a thousand times.

Image by image, this is an immaculate film. At times a little too immaculate, a little too self-conscious in its art: when Swinton, avoiding an encounter in a supermarket, takes shelter against a splendid backdrop of red soup cans she might be posing for a portrait by Norman Rockwell ("American Housewife, 1959"). The soundtrack takes a keen interest in everyday noise – lawn sprinklers, windscreen wipers, photocopiers – and then intersperses it with sweet (sometimes sickly) ballads sung by, among others, Lonnie Donegan and Buddy Holly. The purpose isn't clear. Irony, like Vera Lynn singing "We'll Meet Again" when the nuclear bombs go off at the end of "Dr Strangelove"? Or is it, perhaps, a protest against the old sentimentalisations of childhood?

Endearing though it is to hear Donegan yodel his way through "Nobody's Child", the music rubs against the grain, adding a rustic wail and squawk to a film that is otherwise beautifully judged. How easy it would have been to have taken Shriver's novel and shifted the emphasis from the mystery to the violence, and yet the cruellest act we witness in Ramsay's film is a mother losing her temper with her child and unintentionally breaking his arm. The real blood-letting happens out of shot.

The visual absence of the massacre is a mercy. In its place we have the film's true concern, which is that fear of the unknown (and the unknowable) among women when they give birth to children of the rival sex. Kevin, as bad as bad could be, takes a common parental question – why is our son a stranger to us? – and writes it memorably large. ■

We Need to Talk About Kevin opens in Britain and Ireland on October 21st; at selected cinemas in America, December 2nd; out now in France

CZARTORYSKI MUSEUM KRAKOW POLAND/GETTY

ART

A lady with two faces

"Lady with an Ermine" is the second-most famous woman in Leonardo's life. As she makes a rare trip to London, **Francesca Kay** looks at her magic

CONSIDER THE ERMINE: a stoat in winter fur. Stoats are small and fierce and quick and feral; they kill by biting the necks of their prey; they are said to mesmerise their larger victims with a snake-like dance. And now look at Leonardo da Vinci's ermine, resting quietly, although still very much alert, in the loose grip of his mistress. His left paw is upraised in a heraldic gesture. He has intelligent eyes, his mouth is closed over sharp teeth, his fur is soft and creamy, and his owner's long fingers rest gently on him. This is a beautiful, sleek creature, a beloved pet.

The lady is Cecilia Gallerani, aged about 16 when her portrait was painted, c.1490, and at that time the favourite mistress of Lodovico Sforza, the immensely powerful duke of Milan. In the year after she was painted, Cecilia gave birth to Lodovico's son, and Lodovico married Beatrice d'Este, who soon ensured her rival was dismissed. Records suggest that when she left the Sforza castle, Cecilia took the painting with her.

"Lady with an Ermine" lives in Krakow these days, but she is about to be displayed in Britain for the first time. The National Gallery in London is bringing together seven of Leonardo's paintings – half of his surviving works of paint on wood – and more than 50 drawings, from the period when he was the court painter in Milan. There will be other famous paintings in the exhibition, but it is Cecilia who will be the star.

We can reasonably assume that the portrait was commissioned by Leonardo's patron, the enamoured duke. Cecilia was apparently as gifted as she was lovely – a poet, linguist and musician. Why then did Leonardo pair her with an animal that few would call endearing? Why draw attention to the stoat-like shape of Cecilia's face: was it a waspish tease, a moral rebuke, a subtle act of malice?

On one level the inclusion of the ermine is a tribute to Lodovico, who used it as an emblem. There is a knowing joke here: a ruthless lord is fondled by his mistress, made submissive by the power of love. But, in another aspect, this animal is Cecilia herself. See how the curve of Cecilia's shoulder rhymes perfectly with the curve of the ermine's body, how her bent wrist echoes its paw, how the two are connected in a sinuous flowing spiral, how their matching eyes, clear and brown, look at the same point to their right – both at the duke, we presume, who, in this most elegant of compositions, is also the source of light. The ermine and the girl are almost indivisible, two aspects of one being: you can see how they inspired Philip Pullman's daemons, the animal spirits or alter-egos that were such a telling feature of "His Dark Materials".

In folklore the ermine was a symbol of purity, because it was supposed to prefer death to the defilement of its snowy coat. Leonardo knew this – the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge has a drawing by him of the myth. But no one as observant as Leonardo could fail to see that the ermine has two faces, and that in its stoat-guise it is brown, smells musky and is vicious.

"The good painter has to paint two principal things," Leonardo wrote of figure painting, "that is to say, man and the intention of his mind." Yes, but the intentions of a man's mind – or a woman's – are not singular. One reason for the great allure of this painting is the hint of troubling duality. Stoat and ermine, lover and beloved, girl and animal – beautiful Cecilia, with her immaculate white skin, is a mistress, not a lawful wife. She could equally be predatory as pure and honourable; she could indeed be prey herself. The potentially dangerous creature in her arms is captive, for the moment. But while Cecilia may have captivated the mighty Lodovico, she herself, dependent on patronage like the painter, is subject to his will. There's not much security in the post of ducal pet, as Cecilia would soon discover. The fillet on her brow, the edging of her veil, the beads around her neck, her helmet hair, may all be in the latest fashion, but they bind Cecilia closely.

Those bindings have another function – to highlight the perfect proportions of the woman's head. And here's the real purpose of the portrait. Leonardo wrote that beauty lies in harmonious proportion, and beauty inspires love. This is above all a painting of supreme harmony, the creation of a perfect whole through total mastery of line and shadow, light and form. Look at this woman, Leonardo is saying: ambiguous and flawed like every human being, but beautiful and lovable. Now, though, after more than half a millennium on this earth in her painted incarnation, Cecilia is also very fragile; she may never be allowed to go travelling again. Seize the chance to see her. ■

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan National Gallery, London, November 9th to February 5th

The ermine and the girl are almost indivisible. You can see how they inspired Philip Pullman's daemons

NOTES ON A VOICE

T.S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot is known for a variety of reasons, not always the right ones. Born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1888, dying a British citizen in London in 1965, he was one of the most innovative modern poets. But he tends to be seen as a poet you study rather than read. Seamus Heaney has said that the first time he encountered Eliot's masterpiece "The Waste Land" he "froze in the headlights".

Now Faber and Faber, where Eliot worked from 1925, has released "The Waste Land" as an iPad app. You can hear his finest poem read by Fiona Shaw, Viggo Mortensen and Alec Guinness alongside Eliot himself in his Anglo-American accent. In some ways, he has been coerced into the 21st century. In others, he was already there.

KEY DECISION Letting Ezra Pound edit "The Waste Land". Pound told Eliot to ditch an epigraph from Conrad, which was replaced by one in Latin and Greek, launching Eliot's reputation for obscurity. He cut descriptive passages – "too easy" or too "personal" – and banned "perhaps" ("dam per'apsez", Pound scrawled on the manuscript). The poem became starker, bleaker, but also more exciting and cinematic.

STRONG POINTS "The braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter" ("To Criticize the Critic"). His poetry combines mild anxiety with startling braggadocio in its turns of phrase. Eliot writes in snapshots, picking up the smallest details: teeth as "accidental stars" ("Hysteria") or "the damp souls of housemaids/ Sprouting despondently at area gates" ("Morning at the Window"). His poetry is rooted in landscape – old-style New Hampshire, a sordid London, or the later religiosity of East Coker. He makes them both familiar and strange, creating the effect Fiona Shaw hears in the "Unreal City" of "The Waste Land", where the poem becomes a "prick to the back of the mind".

GOLDEN RULE To be not just a poet. While writing "The Waste Land", Eliot worked in the foreign department of Lloyd's bank, and his poem owes much to the area "along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street". It allowed him to have the double life he parodies in the prose work "Eeldrop and Appleplex": "I am, I confess to you, in private life, a bank-clerk..." Respectable by day, less so by night, in "The Waste Land" Eliot moves between snatches of coarse conversation, lines from Shakespeare and the background noise of the pub. As he switches rhythms and registers, the poem seems to eavesdrop on itself.

FAVOURITE TRICK Delaying rhymes over several lines, which makes them feel as natural as everyday speech. In his early poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), the obvious, repeated couplet "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" is framed by other, quieter rhymes: "half-deserted streets" with "muttering retreats", or "indecisions" fittingly coupled with "revisions". Eliot can obscure such rhymes through the sheer length of his sentences, clauses often running over 12 lines or more to stretch languorously down the page, "like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent/ To lead you to an overwhelming question..." Far from tedious, Eliot's verse is tightly controlled – favourite words include "meticulous" – and yet it shows the lightest of touch.

ROLE MODELS The metaphysical philosopher F.H. Bradley taught Eliot to write with carefully constructed phrases. But it was the metaphysical poets who helped him forget such carefulness. Donne, said Eliot, "*feels* an idea; almost as if it were something he can touch and stroke." Drawing on Dante's Inferno and the flânerie of Baudelaire, Eliot could not have created his 20th-century inferno without such divergent influences.

TYPICAL LINES "At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing waiting" ("The Waste Land"). - EMMA HOGAN

The Waste Land *for iPad, Faber/Touch Press; £9.99/$13.99. Edward Fox recites "The Four Quartets", Holy Trinity, Brook Green, London W6, October 17th*

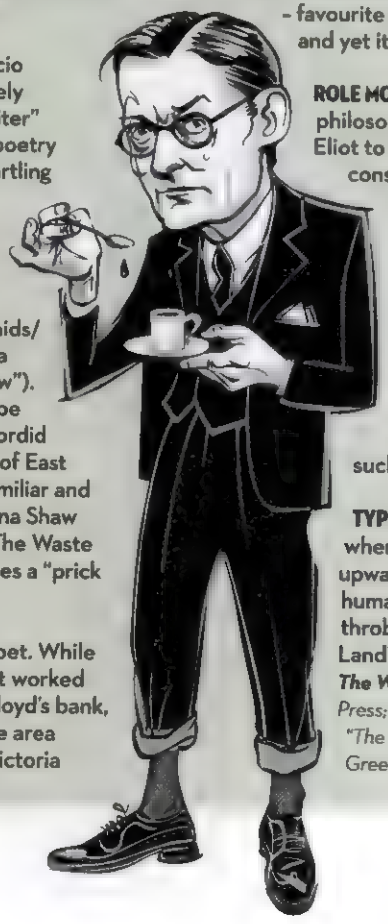


ILLUSTRATION **KATHRYN RATHKE**

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

The power of chimeras

AUTHOR **TOMÁS ELOY MARTÍNEZ**
TITLE IN ENGLISH **PURGATORY**
ORIGINAL TITLE **PURGATORIO** 2008
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE **SPANISH**
TRANSLATOR **FRANK WYNNE** 2011

Orson Welles has an unlikely cameo in this novel about the long aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War, and Tomás Eloy Martínez gives him perhaps its most important line: "Things exist only when we see them." The last book Eloy Martínez wrote before he died in 2010, now limpidly translated by Frank Wynne, it explores the hazy No Man's Land between how things appear and how they are. If that sounds like a recipe for metaphysical hocus-pocus, don't be put off. "Purgatory" is an intriguingly circuitous, occasionally confounding but more often poignant story of loss.

Emilia Dupuy is a middle-aged woman living in New Jersey, an exile from Argentina. Her father, Dr Orestes Dupuy, was the chief propagandist for the military junta that terrorised Argentina between 1976 and 1983, when thousands of people became *desaparecidos*, the disappeared. Among them was Emilia's husband. She spends the next 30 years looking for him – her purgatory, "a wait whose end we cannot know" – sustained by a sense that he survived.

Narrated by a novelist, himself an exiled Argentine who sounds not unlike Eloy Martínez, the story takes us from Emilia's life in America to her past in Buenos Aires, and from her testimony to novelistic invention. Sometimes Eloy Martínez lingers too long on a scene, and the sex is more fun for the characters than for the reader. But "Purgatory" is a compassionate novel about the power of chimeras – of what we choose to see, of what we can bear to see – and the way grief clots when it is unresolved. - SIMON WILLIS

Bloomsbury, hardback, November 7th

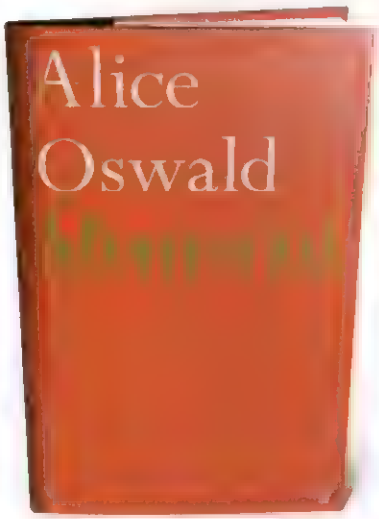
CAMERA PRESS

Maggie Fergusson *Eight Good Books*

Robert Harris and Julian Barnes on top form, plus a fine life of Dickens and a sharp twist on Homer

FICTION **The Fear Index by Robert Harris** (Hutchinson, hardback, out now). With his eighth novel, but only his second set in the present day (after "The Ghost"), Robert Harris will surely notch up another international bestseller. Alex Hoffman, a Geneva-based scientist turned hedge-fund supremo, has the Midas touch. But when he devises an algorithm capable of predicting the effects of human fear on world stockmarkets, he risks being devoured by his own brilliance. Harris's swift, lucid prose enables even the most mathematically challenged to feel at home with "quants" and "shorts". And while Hoffman's sidekick is your classic "steel-balled shit", Hoffman himself is sufficiently subtle and psychologically fragile to flesh out the drama with human interest. A "Frankenstein" for the 21st century.

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes (Cape, hardback, out now). Memory and the tricks it plays on us form the heart of this novella, which is laugh-aloud funny one moment, disturbing the next. A lawyer's letter forces Tony – recently retired and amicably divorced – to revisit events he has long kept buried, centring on a schoolfriend, Adrian, who committed suicide, and a spiky ex-girlfriend, Veronica. Barnes shows his usual forensic eye for human interaction, and there's a twist in the tale. "You just don't get it, do you?" Veronica chides Tony. Nor will you, until the second-last page.



A Lovesong for India by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (Little, Brown, paperback, out now). Don't be deceived by the title of this collection of stories. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala – the only writer to have won both the Booker and two Oscars – is a post-Raj realist, not a romantic. Not for the first time, she anatomises fraught relationships between parents and children, exploding the myth that Eastern spirituality confers harmony on family life: a decent Delhi couple are brought low by their crooked son; a man is emasculated by his manipulative mother. Often, she creates characters so monstrous and bizarre that their stories are like fairy tales, unfolding with dark humour and an undertow of melancholy.

BIOGRAPHY **Charles Dickens: A Life by Claire Tomalin** (Penguin, hardback, out now). Dickens's bicentenary falls in February, and Claire Tomalin made me almost long to be bedridden until then, to bury myself in his books. She conjures up a man of many different selves: a performer of rock-star charisma, who mesmerised audiences of thousands before the invention of the microphone; a social reformer way ahead of his time (anything but Dickensian); a sentimental lover; a cruel husband. Showing her usual involved detachment, Tomalin achieves something "the inimitable" himself might have been proud of – a triumph of energy and empathy.

Edward Burne-Jones by Fiona MacCarthy (Faber, hardback, out now). The real hero of Fiona MacCarthy's latest doorstop is the subject's wife and fellow artist, Georgie. Why did she put up with her husband's obsessive relationships with younger girls? Why did she allow him to go out for wild dinners with men friends such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the chaser of "stunners" who ran off with the wife of their best friend? That friend was William Morris, whose life MacCarthy published in 1994. A masterly guide to Burne-Jones and the pre-Raphaelite world, she somehow paints a sympathetic portrait of this wayward genius.

How to Survive the Titanic by Frances Wilson (Bloomsbury, hardback, out now). As the *Titanic* sank, her owner, J. Bruce Ismay, jumped into a lifeboat. He was never to live down the shame of survival. But in Frances Wilson's hands Ismay warms from cold-fish coward into a figure of pity and fascination. The victim of a certain kind of Englishness – routinely humiliated at home, then Harrow – he believed he had met the love of his life just before his ship hit the iceberg. Into his story, Wilson weaves Conrad's "Lord Jim", published in 1899, and uncannily foreshadowing Ismay's fate. The resulting mixture of literary criticism, biography and psychodrama is original and thought-provoking.

POETRY **Memorial by Alice Oswald** (Faber, paperback, out now). With collections such as "Dart", Alice Oswald's eye for English nature and her visionary precision have won well-deserved prizes. In this bravura long poem she leaves the placid wetlands of England for the killing fields of Troy. Her radical version of Homer is, she says, "a kind of oral cemetery". She intersperses her haunting recital of names and deaths (sudden, brutal, specific deaths, by spear and sword) with soaring similes – an antiphony of traditional lament and extravagant pastoral lyric. The similes repeat, mesmerically, like a chorus, and, in a feat of virtuosity, there is no punctuation at all.

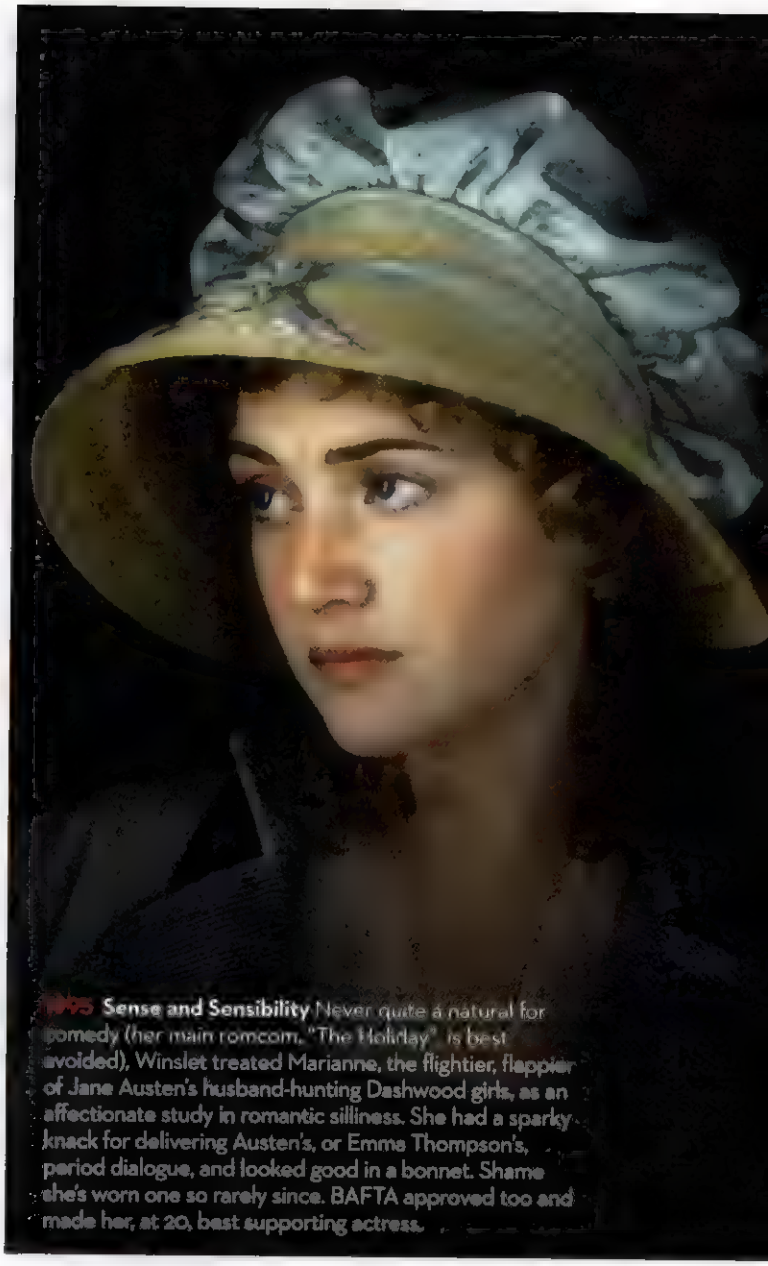
ART **A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney by Martin Gayford** (Thames & Hudson, hardback, out now). Hockney is a natural communicator, incisive, witty, unpretentious. You don't need a particularly arty appetite to be absorbed as he chats to Martin Gayford – himself a mercifully plain-speaking critic – about the difference between geometrical and psychological truth, the drawbacks of single-point perspective, the limitations of photography, or the joys of sending friends a daily bouquet of flowers, painted on an iPhone. And if you are desk- and city-bound, you may close this lavishly illustrated book determined to slow down, look harder, and join Hockney in trying to see things "clearer, and clearer, and clearer still". ■

THE VISUAL CV

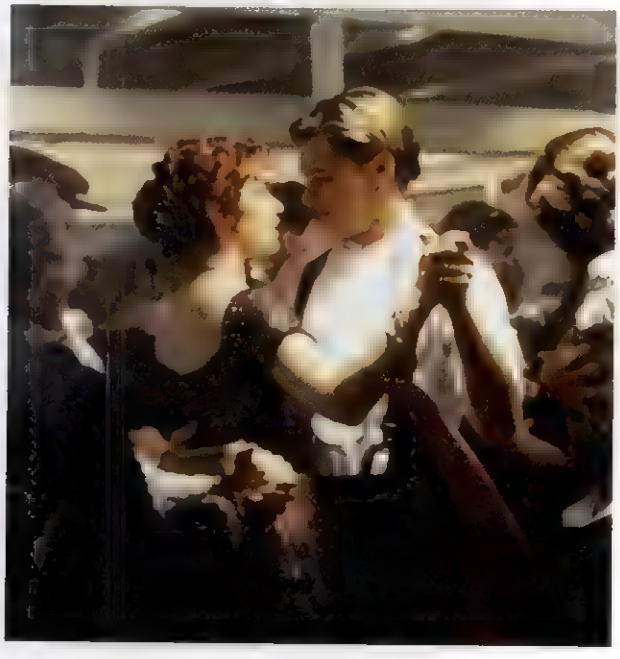
Kate Winslet

From a murderous schoolgirl to a tiresome mother, via Jane Austen and "Titanic": at 36, Kate Winslet has already had a long career. **Jasper Rees** picks her best work

1994 Heavenly Creatures Winslet entered both her parents' profession at 15 and already had several television roles under her belt when, at 17, she was one of the leads in Peter Jackson's big-screen debut. She played one of a pair of Kiwi schoolgirls who take a friendship powered by fantasy to the next level. As the more manipulative of the two, Winslet suggested she already grasped the point of acting as display, as seduction, as advocacy.

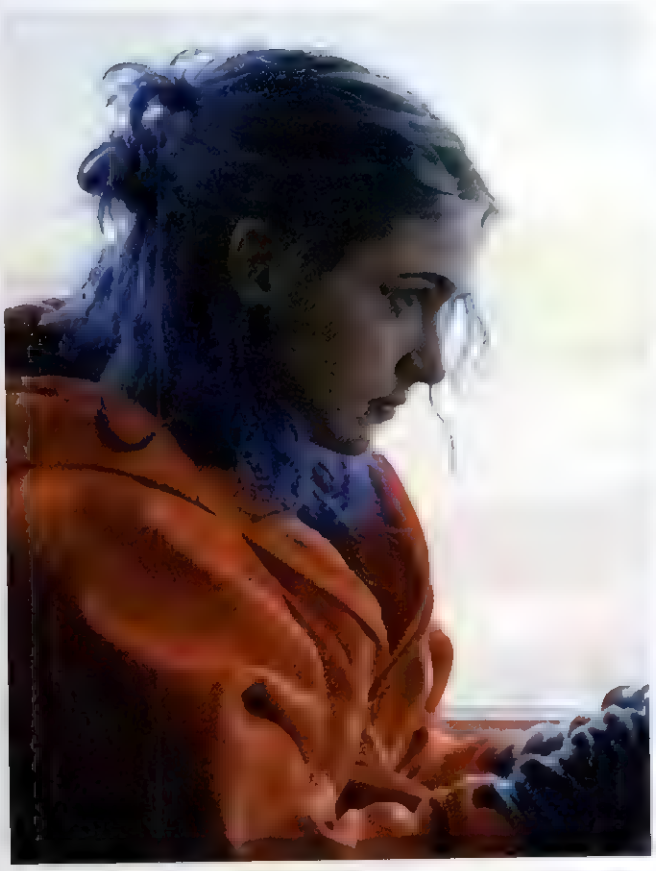


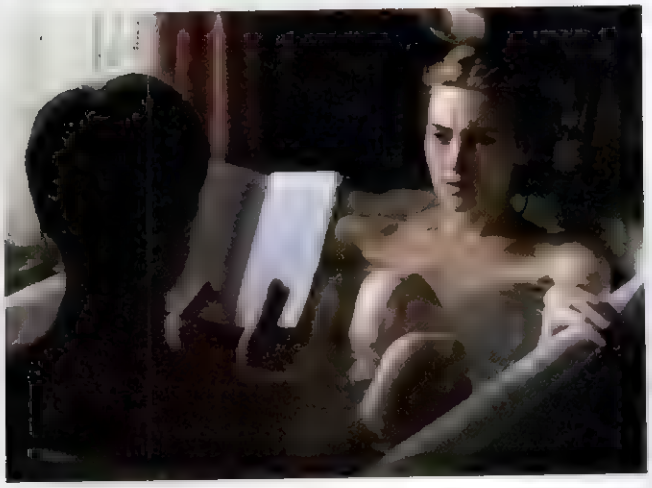
1995 Sense and Sensibility Never quite a natural for comedy (her main romcom, "The Holiday", is best avoided), Winslet treated Marianne, the flightier, flappier of Jane Austen's husband-hunting Dashwood girls, as an affectionate study in romantic silliness. She had a sparky knack for delivering Austen's, or Emma Thompson's, period dialogue, and looked good in a bonnet. Shame she's worn one so rarely since. BAFTA approved too and made her, at 20, best supporting actress.



1997 Titanic It was a natural segue to her first big American role in James Cameron's epic blockbuster. Winslet spent half the shoot shivering miserably in a water tank. However much the film itself is derided, no one can fault what its young heroine did with thinnish pickings supplied by a story about a well-bred fiancée who falls for Leonardo DiCaprio's bit of rough. By no means a stick-thin cover girl, she shed clothes and inhibition and has been a (sometimes photoshopped) poster girl for ordinary woman ever since.

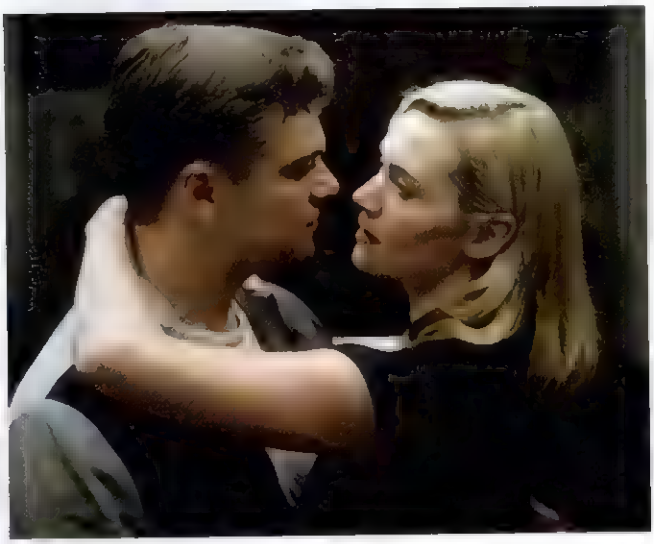
2001 Iris Winslet has played few real-life characters, but in a small film adapted from John Bayley's account of his wife's descent into dementia, she incarnated the young Iris Murdoch as an intellectual and sexual adventuress, while Judi Dench played her as a famous novelist losing her mind. In her most mature and layered performance to date, Winslet hinted that one day she too will be treasured by the nation.





2011 Mildred Pierce, and **Carnage** Her second television role since "Casualty" in 1993 (the other was "Extras") featured a rivetingly sad Winslet in an HBO adaptation of James M. Cain's Depression-era portrait of a flailing wife and mother. It brought her an Emmy and there was talk of re-editing it as a feature film. We'll have to wait a lot longer to see Winslet follow her parents on stage, but she will soon give us the next best thing: a role as a prissy liberal working mother in Roman Polanski's version of Yasmina Reza's stage hit "God of Carnage" (*right*). For the first time in years, she makes people laugh.

2004 Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind Romance with a very twisted twist. Charlie Kaufman's script about a separated couple seeking to wipe each other from their memory called on Winslet to lose herself in a role as never before, or maybe since. There were even more colours in this portrait of an unhappy young woman than hair dyes (and there were plenty of those). One nagging thought: who on earth would want to erase Kate Winslet from their memory?



2008 Revolutionary Road Answer: maybe Sam Mendes? The director became Winslet's second husband in 2003, but there was something odd in this collaboration based on Richard Yates's 1961 novel. Mendes directed his wife in the suburban story of an ailing marriage (to DiCaprio) in which Winslet's stifled consort eventually performs a fatal abortion on herself. As ever, she gave it her all. Was life imitating art when director and star later separated? The consolation prize was her first Golden Globe, after seven nominations.

2008 The Reader Winslet's illiterate former SS camp guard whose summer affair with a young boy is her finest hour. Also saddest, deepest, truest. In no other film has she had to challenge an audience to feel for her. To play the antiheroine of Bernhard Schlink's bestseller, Winslet found a moral ugliness in herself that would be beyond the range of a regular Hollywood heroine. Cue a job lot of awards, including an Oscar.

REX FEATURES/ALL STAR, CAPITAL PICTURES

A watery underworld

Under the sweltering surface of the Yucatán peninsula are caverns full of cool fresh water. **Tom Wainwright** takes the plunge to get to the bottom of their role in Mexican history

A HUNDRED FEET off the Caribbean coast of Mexico, where the water is as clear as tequila, the fish know that something is up. A great silvery shoal is wafting back and forth against an invisible barrier, reluctant to go any farther. If you look closer, just beneath a rocky overhang, you see that something about the water is different: here it swirls and shifts, from the warm, salty blur of brine to sudden, chilly, clear windows. And if you dive a few feet down you see what lies beneath the rock where the fish don't dare to go: the narrow mouth of a long, dark cave leading beneath the sea bed and back towards the land, gently pumping out icy fresh water.

Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, which millions of years ago formed part of the sea bed, is like a giant stone sponge, riddled with underground caverns which are flooded with clear, filtered rain water. The cave systems, which are said to include the world's largest single network, leak out into the open sea, leaving Mexico's Caribbean coast dotted with hidden entrances to the underworld. When the waves are calm, a visitor with a slender build and a pair of oxygen cylinders can duck down into the dark passages, to emerge a nervous few hundred yards inland, along with freshwater fish and a few bewildered crabs that have somehow clawed their way through the darkness.

The fresh water provides a blessed relief from the baking crust of Mexico's deep south, where temperatures hover around 30°C and the oppressive humidity leaves your clothes permanently damp. Dotted around the peninsula like cigarette burns in the rock are more than 2,000 natural sinkholes known as cenotes – from the Mayan word *dzonot*, meaning abyss – which lead down into the underwater reservoirs. For hundreds of years the cenotes have given the locals access to fresh water in a landscape that lacks any rivers or lakes. Fishermen have even been able to stock up on drinking water far out at sea, where a handful of underwater cenotes called *ojos de agua* (eyes of water) gush fresh water into the Caribbean in a few secret spots known to the trawlers.

These days, the cenotes are used more for fun than survival. A little way into the jungle beyond the coastal road to Tulum lies Cenote Calavera, or the Cenote of the Skull. A barrel-shaped attendant is doing his best to persuade tourists to ignore the sinister name. "Come and swim, there's no one else here today. You don't even need your clothes!" For a few pesos you are led through the trees to a patch of white rock, where three narrow shafts bore into the ground. If you scramble up onto a higher spot of land, you can see that the holes in the rock form two eyes and a grinning mouth, in the shape of a toothless skull. Deep within the eyes, clear water sparkles. That's how the cenote got its name, then? "Also the human sacrifices," our cheery guide explains.

A dark leap into a skull-shaped burial pit may not sound all that appealing. But when the sun is like a blowtorch on your neck, the chilliness of the underworld seems a tempting prospect. I edge forward to the lip of the skull's mouth, take a breath and step forward into thin air, tumbling into the darkness of the »

> skull's throat. The water, which I send shooting up out of the skull's mouth like spit, is icy. When I come up for air, I can make out the walls of the cavern, lit by three shafts of light streaming in through the eyes and mouth in the roof of the cave. Fish nibble my toes. A few seconds later I nearly jump out of my skin as what sounds like booming laughter echoes around the cave. As I scramble for the rope I realise it's just the noise of the waves from my jump slapping the sides of the cave, where they create an echo that rumbles through the cavern. Ducking down under the water, I can see where the cave's edges slope away into pitch-black tunnels, leading off to other cenotes deeper in the jungle. The water suddenly seems chillier as I think about what those fish would have nibbled on here a few hundred years ago.

THE ANCIENT MAYANS believed the natural wells to be gifts from their bloodthirsty gods. Today's scientists have come up with a theory that is not much less outlandish. In 1990 researchers poring over satellite pictures from NASA noticed a strange pattern in the northern part of the Yucatán. If you do a dot-to-dot of the cenotes there, you get an imperfect semicircle which sweeps from the north-eastern border with Quintana Roo, down beyond the ruined Mayan city of Chichén Itzá and back up to the coast west of Mérida. At the centre of this wobbly semicircle lies the Chicxulub Crater, a long-buried hole beneath the sea with a diameter of more than 100 miles, which is where the meteor that is believed to have done for the dinosaurs crashed 65m years ago. Some now wonder if the cenotes were bored into the land by heavy rocks shed by the meteor as it screeched over the Yucatán on its flight path into the Gulf of Mexico. The Mayan belief that the cenotes were sent from the heavens may not have been far wrong.

Their need to please those fickle gods led to dizzying levels of violence. A few hundred kilometres inland from the Cenote of the Skull is evidence of the brutal acts that were carried out above these beautiful pools. At Chichén Itzá tourists marvel at the intricacy and ingenuity of the Mayan architecture, which is still gradually being freed from the clutches of the surrounding jungle. Stand at the bottom of the Castillo, the famous central ziggurat, and clap your hands: the echo bounces back distorted into a squeak imitating the rainbow-tailed, afro-hairstyled quetzal bird, which the Mayans considered sacred and which can still sometimes be seen in the deeper bits of the Yucatán jungle. The same pyramid contains another architect's joke: as the sun sets over its edge, the jagged steps cast a shadow of a giant snake wriggling down the side of the building. The pyramid was designed so that this trick only happens twice a year, on the equinox.

Some now wonder if the cenotes were bored into the land by heavy rocks shed by a meteor

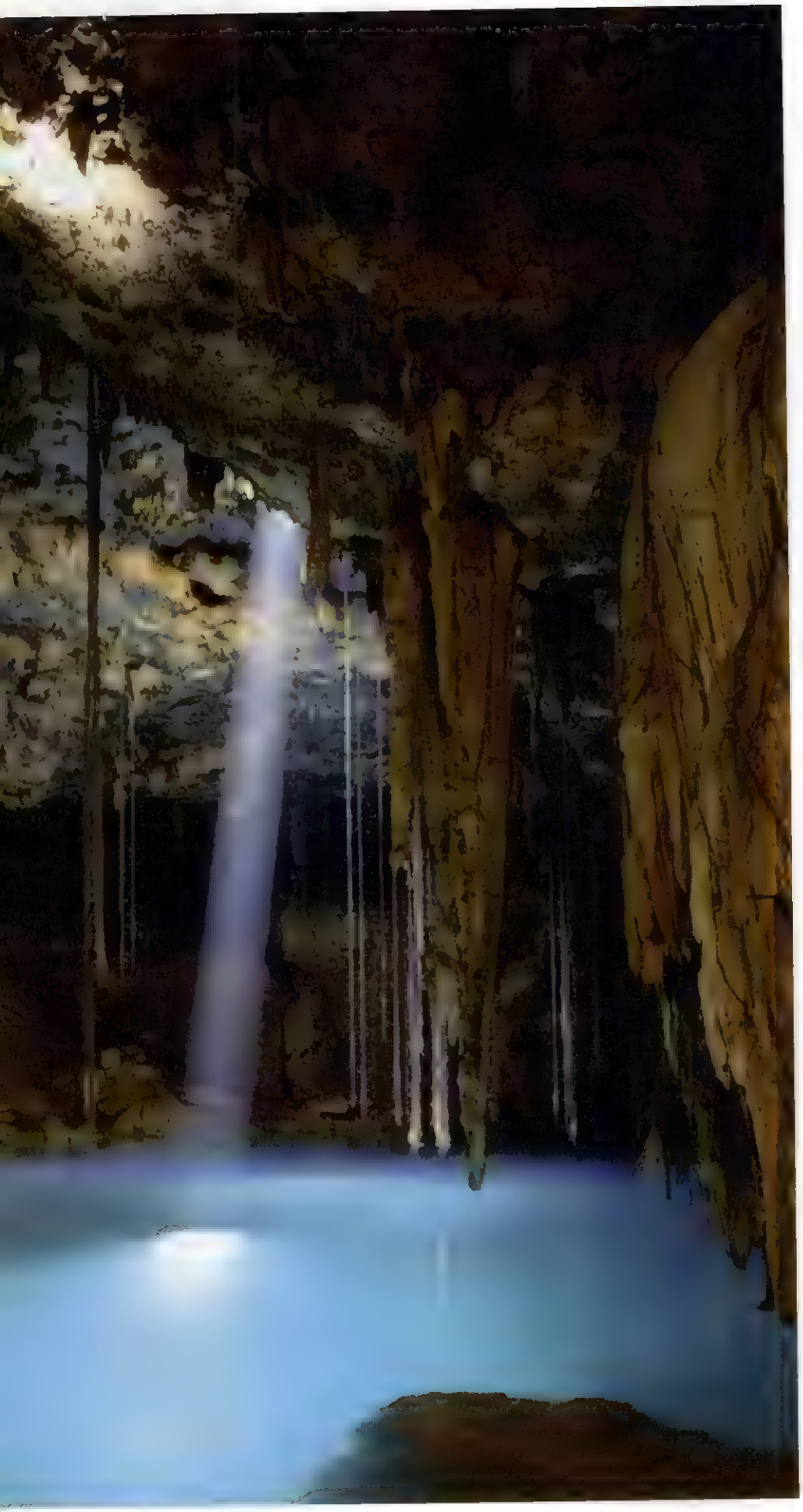
What lies beneath
ABOVE An ancient skull, probably from a Mayan sacrifice, rests on the sandy bed of a cenote.
RIGHT Stalactites above the tranquil waters of the Cenote de Dzitnup

But the Mayans' ingenuity had a cruel streak. Opposite the Castillo lies a gigantic platform decorated with life-size stone skulls stacked one on top of the other along its sides. On this platform were piled real skinned heads, probably those of prisoners captured in skirmishes with local rivals. A few hundred metres away in a jungle clearing lies the giant Sacred Cenote, an offputtingly green and swampy lake that once fed the city of Chichén. In there, divers have found human bones, mainly belonging to children and young adult men – the people, experts speculate, most likely to be sacrificed. (Also, it occurs to me, the people most likely to mess around on the edges of the deep sinkhole and slip in by mistake.)

The Maya were by no means the only people to practise human sacrifice before the Spanish conquest. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who outlasted his fellow conquistadors to die on his estate in Guatemala in about 1580 at the age of nearly 90, wrote graphic descriptions of the gruesome rites in his "True History of the Conquest of New Spain" (a racier read than the stodgy letters of his boss, Hernán Cortés). Landing west of Yucatán in what is now Veracruz, Díaz encountered scenes of slaughter. "I remember that in the square...were many piles of human skulls, so neatly arranged that we could count them, and I reckoned them at more than a hundred thousand. I repeat that there were more than a hundred thousand. And in another part of the square there were more piles made up of innumerable thigh-bones. There was also a large number of skulls and bones strung between wooden posts...We saw more of such things in every town as we penetrated farther inland."

The murder reached a high pitch in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. On top of the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple, tens of thousands of victims were sacrificed to tempt the gods to send rain. "They strike open the wretched Indian's chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart," wrote Díaz. In one grisly temple, "they were burning the hearts of three Indians whom they had sacrificed that day; and all the walls of that shrine were so splashed and caked with blood that they and the floor too were black...the stench was worse than that of any slaughterhouse in Spain." A couple of miles from my home in Mexico City lies a neighbourhood that used to be called Malcuitlapilco, which literally translates as "the end of the line of prisoners". The spot marks the back of the procession of victims who were lined up to be ritually murdered at the top of the Templo Mayor on its inauguration in 1487. The area, where

BARCROFT MEDIA, ALAMY



there is now a busy metro station, is nearly a mile from the temple.

Cortés and co. soon began a programme of building cathedrals alongside, or sometimes directly on top of, these temples. Catholic beliefs eventually dripped into the cenotes too. Close to the ruins of Ek Balam, another ancient Mayan city in the Yucatán, lies a little-visited cenote only accessible by bike. (Specially converted delivery rickshaws are on hand to transport those who have succumbed to the intense heat.) Locals observe that every year the normally blue waters turn green during Semana Santa, the holy week leading up to Easter. During this green period (the less devout might put it down to the growth of algae during the hottest season, which coincides with Easter), the cenote waters are supposed to give a special energy to those who bathe in them. For those who still need energising, the tourism authority has rigged up a zip-line over the top of the cenote. A small café has recently opened on the edge, where a solar-powered fridge provides life-giving Coca-Cola, and there is a steady fire, smoking pork.

Not far from Ek Balam, along a motorway where bird-sized butterflies are sacrificed against your windscreen, you arrive in Valladolid, a sultry city of warm-coloured terraces and quiet courtyards that is known as the Sultaness of the East. Like any big settlement in the Yucatán, Valladolid grew up around cenotes. In the south of the town, Cenote Sis-Há ("cold water") lies within the grounds of the San Bernardino de Siena monastery. With its thick walls to protect against the heat and a lush garden inside, the monastery meant that being a monk in 16th-century Valladolid was a wise career choice even before taking the private cenote into account. Its main mouth is enclosed by a stone building that houses a water-winching apparatus, which provided water for the town. The cenote itself, some 50 metres in diameter, is full of catfish – "small, but very delicious", according to a Franciscan church official who visited in 1584. One of its four small openings even goes directly into the monastery's kitchen.

But this cenote served another purpose. Divers from Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (Underwater Archaeology Subdirectorate) have made a series of expeditions down the narrow well. On a dive in 2003 they recovered a large arms dump: rifles, ammunition and even cannon and balls were rusting at the bottom of the pool. The weapons are thought to date from the Yucatán's bloody caste war, which began in 1847 and saw local Mayans rise up against the Mexican national government, itself newly independent from Spain. On >

> March 14th 1848, the city of Valladolid was evacuated as the Mayan army advanced. As a column of 10,000 residents and 100 carriages fled the machete-wielding Mayans (who managed to slaughter a good proportion of them), commanders ditched their weapons into the monastery's cenote, so that they couldn't be used by the rebels.

These rebels, short on ammunition, resorted to using home-made cartridges in their rifles. The *palanqueta*, described in a contemporary account as a "not very Christian missile", was a piece of iron a little under an inch long, which made a distinctively shrill buzz as it whistled towards its target. When metal ran out, the rebels made bullets from clay baked with molasses. Eventually, though, even that was not enough. An article of January 20th 1849 in *El Fénix*, a local newspaper, reported: "The Indians are desperate following the events in Valladolid and Tihosuco: they lack sufficient powder, their firearms are in extremely poor condition and they do not have even a scrap of paper for making cartridges because they have used up all that of the archives and the books of the church." Fighting was especially miserable during the rainy season: skirmishes were prolonged because, as they cowered in muddy trenches, neither side could get their gunpowder charges to light.

Valladolid was eventually recaptured, but it would be well into the 20th century before peace was reached with the last rebels of the Yucatán. Part of their doggedness was derived from a miracle that took place at another cenote, close to the rebel base of Chan Santa Cruz (now Felipe Carrillo Puerto), which lies near the border with Belize. At a cenote on the edge of town there was a wooden cross. During the Mayan rebels' lowest ebb in 1849, it suddenly began to talk. The cross had good news: the Mayans should plug away with their fight against the government, it said, because they were the chosen people, and would ultimately win. It turned out that this wasn't the case, a fact that some people attribute to the Mayan leaders' hiring of a ventriloquist to do the talking on behalf of the cross. True believers insist that the cross continues to make occasional statements, however, and it has its own special celebration every May 3rd.

YUCATAN'S HIDDEN UNDERWORLD is now more heavily visited than ever. Mexico is the world's tenth most popular country among international tourists, and many of its 22m annual visitors end up on the Yucatán peninsula. Most don't stray far from Cancún, the tequila-fuelled Spring Break party paradise/nightmare, but recent improvements to roads in the region are making it easier for tourists to take day trips from their resorts to the cenotes. Once a source of life for local Mayans thanks to their clean water, the cenotes are now providing an economic lifeline as a big draw of foreign money.

Once a source of life for local Mayans, the cenotes are now providing an economic lifeline

Access to the water holes themselves has also been improved since the first Western tourists began to explore Yucatán. One of the first foreigners to send back reports of Mexico's subterranean south was John Lloyd Stephens, a native of New Jersey who was named the United States' special ambassador to Central America in 1839. On his travels (during which he bought the ancient Honduran city of Copán for $50), he was led down a cenote in Yucatán. "From the brink on which we stood," he wrote, "an enormous ladder of the rudest possible construction led to the bottom of the hole...Our Indians began the descent, but the foremost had scarcely got his head below the surface before one of the rounds slipped, and he only saved himself by clinging to another. We attempted a descent with some little misgivings...We entered a low and stifling passage; and crawling this on our hands and feet, at the distance of about 300 feet we came to a rocky basin of water."

Stephens would be amazed at some of today's cenotes, a handful of which have been developed for mass tourism. On the road south from Cancún, watery theme parks entice visitors with promises of secrets of the deep – all within a controlled environment, neon lifejackets included. Hidden Worlds, one such development, combines cenote snorkelling and scuba tours with jungle zip-lines. Nearby, a park called Xplor offers tours of cenotes in amphibious

LONELY PLANET

Freshwater playground
Tourists swim in the "Sacred Blue" cenote at Ik-Kil park

buggies for those who don't want to get wet. Cenote Ik-Kil, one of Mexico's most spectacular sinkholes, close to Chichén Itzá, hosted an international high-altitude diving competition earlier this year, in which divers plunged 27 metres from the lip of the cenote into its blue waters. Tourists, in a steady stream, make less daring leaps from a concrete platform built up one side of its limestone cliffs.

The flow of visitors has ebbed a little, following the American recession and the diet of drug-war tales that dominates foreign news coverage of Mexico. In 2009 the swine-flu epidemic turned resorts such as Cancún into ghost towns. Visitor numbers have recovered, but are still not back to the record levels of 2008. That is a pity: in spite of its violent history, Yucatán is now one of the safest places in Latin America. The multi-billion-dollar cocaine trail that runs from the Andes to the nightclubs of the United States has brought havoc to some parts of Mexico, including Acapulco, the Pacific party town where John Wayne had a house and the Clintons honeymooned. But the murder rate in Yucatán state (which makes up a big northern chunk of the peninsula) is 1.8 per 100,000 people – about the same as Belgium. Some drugs enter Mexico via Yucatán's Caribbean coast, which is said to be the territory of the Zetas cartel, one of Mexico's most brutal. But the territory is uncontested, so the violence is minimal and most holidays in Yucatán flow as smoothly as its cenotes.

There may come a day when the visitors get too much, and every cenote is like Hidden Worlds or Xplor. For now, though, there are enough entries to Mexico's watery underworld to ensure that many cenotes are virtually free of tourists. Cenote Azul, named after its blue waters, lies just off the motorway to Cancún. Perhaps because of its lack of zip-lines and lifejackets, it nonetheless remains a mainly local hangout. Mayan families share the pool with rainbow-coloured fish, for which you can buy a bag of feed for five pesos. A sign advertises a cockfight due to take place later in the afternoon. In small pools, teenage mothers glide their protesting babies from bank to bank, while in the bigger pool around the corner, young men take turns to somersault off a rocky overhang. Above the water there is the fertile smell of the jungle and the shrieks of the hidden beasts that live in it. Below the surface, my bright white toes could be walking on the moon: smooth rocky formations lead off into the cenote's gaping mouth, as dark as deep space. Underground, underwater, the cenotes are the silent night to Mexico's boiling, raging day. Whatever dramas play out on the rocks above, the water will keep calmly flowing on. ■

Sightseeing on site

Some hotels are culturally interesting in themselves. **Claire Wrathall** takes a tour of five

RAJASTHAN, INDIA RANVAS
Within the mud walls of an ancient fort, 85 miles north-east of Jodhpur, lies an 18th-century *zenana* (women's quarters) built by a maharaja for his wives. It's a place of breathtaking beauty, all Rajput-Mughal murals, intricate fretwork, graceful colonnades and domed pavilions. Last year the ten *havelis* (houses) opened as a hotel, and though its 20 suites are simple and unfussy, the public areas are resplendent.
Doubles from 22,000 rupees (£310), including breakfast; sujanluxury.com

SUFFOLK, UK THE ICKWORTH
With a soaring central rotunda hung with paintings by Claude, Gainsborough, Hogarth, Reynolds, Titian and Velásquez, Ickworth is a splendid neoclassical house. In 1956 it was given, along with its 1,800-acre park, to the National Trust. The East Wing is now leased to Luxury Family Hotels, which has turned it into a 27-room hotel filled with an eclectic mix of antiques and modern furniture. Although the setting is unmistakably stately, the atmosphere is relaxed and exceptionally child-friendly.
Doubles from £175, including breakfast; ickworthhotel.co.uk

EVORA, PORTUGAL CONVENTO DO ESPINHEIRO
The Spanish infanta Isabel married the heir to the Portuguese throne in 1490 in the church that is now part of this hotel. The public rooms are full of museum-quality religious art, but the architecture is fascinating too: most of the dazzling white buildings show the exuberant Manueline style – named after King Manuel I, who was staying here when he heard that Vasco da Gama had discovered India. It celebrated Portugal's stature as a seafaring nation with carved stone and stucco globes, anchors, knots, ropes and other nautical motifs.
Doubles from €170, including breakfast; conventodoespinheiro.com

FLORENCE, ITALY FOUR SEASONS
Fifteen minutes' walk from the Centro Storico, the Palazzo della Gherardesca, now a Four Seasons hotel, is a treasure house of Renaissance art in its own right. The walls of the chapel, now a reading room, were painted by the Flemish Mannerist Jan van der Straet. The ceilings of the Royal Suite are a riot of frescoes by Baldassare Franceschini. Even in the business centre there are frescoes by Agostino Ciampelli.
Doubles from €605, room only; fourseasons.com

BEIJING, CHINA AMAN AT SUMMER PALACE
Established in the mid-18th century, the Summer Palace was a sort of Chinese Versailles on the edge of Kunming Lake, 15km from Tiananmen Square, in a vast park dotted with temples. Amanresorts' first urban hotel is a conversion of the 19th-century guest quarters built by the Dowager Empress Cixi, a figure of legendary extravagance and ruthlessness, though equally of exquisite taste. It recalls the Forbidden City in its Ming-influenced interiors and its labyrinthine layout.
Doubles from $747.50, room only; amanresorts.com

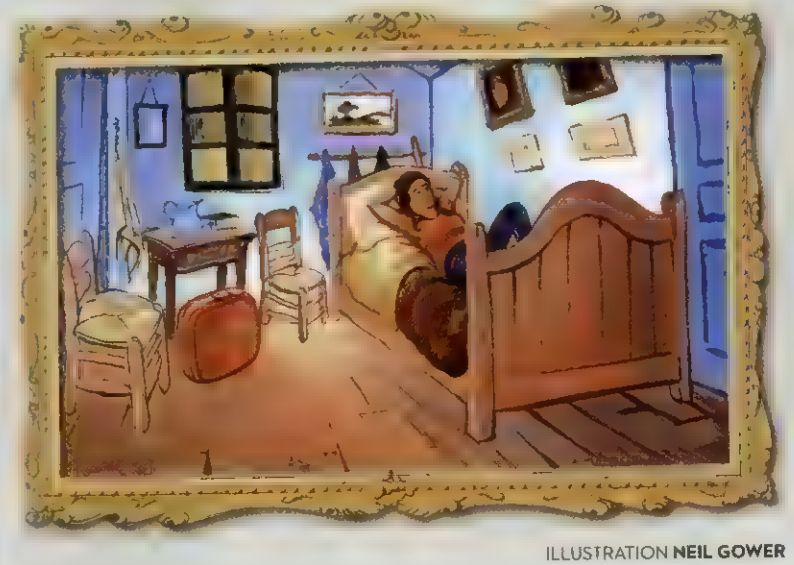


ILLUSTRATION **NEIL GOWER**

SEVEN WONDERS

Reinhold Messner

The first man to climb Everest solo without oxygen, and the first to climb all 14 peaks above 8,000 metres, Reinhold Messner has been described as the best mountaineer ever. He has also found time to be an MEP, author, yak farmer and yeti-hunter, and to launch the Messner Mountain Museum at five sites in South Tyrol. He tells **John Hooper** about the wonders of his icy world

VIEW THE DOLOMITES FROM MONTE RITE

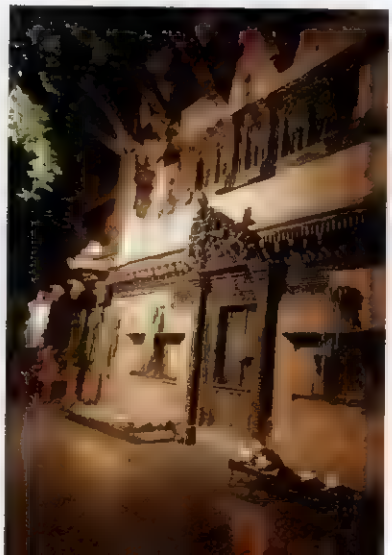
This is the most beautiful place to see the Dolomites, and the Dolomites in my view are the most beautiful mountains in the world. I was born in a valley of the Dolomites, below the Geisler range. I know every peak and every wall, and I know how these mountains are changing every year because I have the eye for it. The mountains of the world are slowly breaking down – not just the Dolomites, but all the world's mountains – and in 10m years, where we have the Dolomites today, we will have a desert. It's natural erosion. I once crossed the Gobi desert. And where the Gobi desert is today there was once a long mountain chain, 2,000 kilometres long and more than 5,000 metres high.

CITY VENICE

My connection with Venice is a museum – part of the Messner Mountain Museum – which I have built in the Dolomites. It's in Belluno [province], which is part of the Veneto region. Venice is the capital of the Veneto, so I often go there to organise things. It's a very special city and the Venetians are a very special people, who started from here and reached the most remote corners of the world. What very few people know, or see, is that Venice is also a city that offers a view of a beautiful landscape – the mountains you can see rising behind the city on a clear day. Maybe it's not so good to live in Venice. It's often cloudy and it rains a lot. But there is nowhere I know more beautiful to visit.

HOTEL DWARIKA'S, KATHMANDU, NEPAL

This is a building that was started by a man [Dwarika Das Shrestha] who died in 1992 and who began to build it because he was in love with Nepalese culture. It's been finished only recently, by Dwarika's widow and her daughter. Today, the hotel has lots of rooms and restaurants. But everything is perfectly in the old style. Going inside, you feel as if you're being taken back to the Middle Ages. It's a very peaceful place. And here you do encounter a distinctive smell – the smell of Nepal. I shall be in Kathmandu next spring and I'll certainly go back.



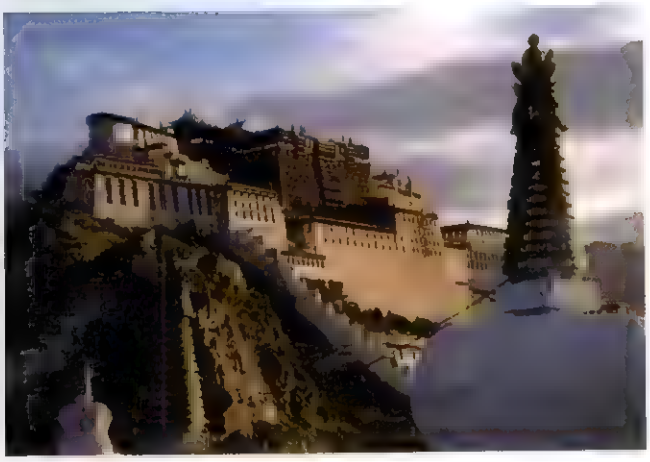
EYEVINE ALAMY GETTY ARG. ARCTIC PHOTO. JOHN PARKER

JOURNEY ACROSS ANTARCTICA

I crossed the continent on foot between November 1989 and February 1990. Most days were just like the one before. Only a few are memorable because you have a storm, say, or you have to cross some crevasses or mountains. But mostly you just hike with a heavy sledge behind you. It's very hard to pull because it's so cold. You can rest for ten minutes, then you have to move or you freeze to death. In the evening you put up the tent, you cook, you try to sleep – it's minus 20°C inside the tent – and in the morning you make breakfast and set off for another eight, nine, ten hours. But it was wonderful all the same. The colours on the ice went from violet to brilliant white to red, depending on the clouds and the sun – the sun is always there, you never lose it. After a month, I felt I was not on this Earth, that I was in another habitat where the art of survival is different.

WORK OF ART ABSTURZ BY FERDINAND HODLER

The original painting was ten metres high. It was one of two he did for the 1894 World Exposition in Antwerp. And then he allowed it to be cut up. I don't know why. Now it's in a museum in Berne. It's the story of the disaster on Edward Whymper's descent after he became the first man to climb the Matterhorn. Four of his party died. It's a difficult painting, but Hodler understood, I think, what it meant to the people who were there. I've only been able to see parts of the painting, not the whole composition, but those are enough to tell me – from the way his subjects are touching the rock, the positions in which they are lying – that he had a real insight into what had happened.

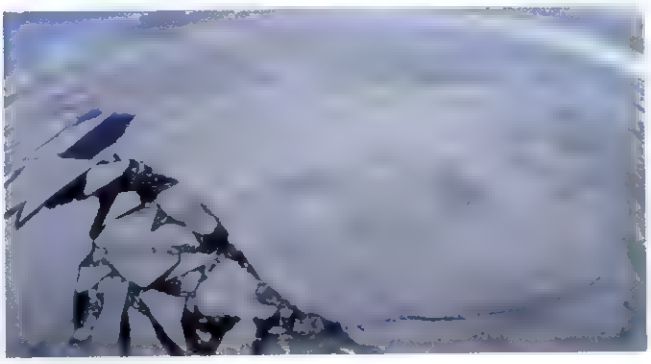


BUILDING THE POTALA PALACE, LHASA

But not the one you see today. What you see today is sterile. It's still the same building, but you can only see part of it, and everything has been arranged the way it is in a modern museum. In 1979 and 1980, though, I had an opportunity to visit Potala when to do so was to enter a truly hidden world. It was still exactly as it had been when the Dalai Lama left in 1959. I remember there were thousands of fire-gilded Buddhas. Just as we have houses full of books, they had filled room after room with thousands and thousands of bronze Buddhas. The Chinese who control Lhasa today have hidden most of the religious symbols and everything else is behind glass now. The smell is not there either. There was a smell of Tibet, a bit like the one you find in our churches. It was unmistakable.

BEACH EAST GREENLAND (PREFERABLY IN WINTER)

The first time I went it was to cross Greenland in winter with two Norwegians. But it was too warm. Then I came back with my brother and we made the longest crossing ever, from the south-eastern tip to the north-western tip – 2,200 kilometres. Since I can't swim, I prefer the sea when it's iced over. That way I can go out onto it. It's wonderful to see, and hear, the pack ice moving. It cracks. It speaks. There are different colours depending on the angle of the sun. And you feel as if the ice is talking to you. The sound it makes when it splits is different from the sound when two bits are pushed together. You need a certain amount of experience to tell what's happening, but I learnt to listen to the voice of the ice, and for me this place is better than the most beautiful, sunny beach in the South Seas.



BEING THERE

Riga

Our series on life as an expat reaches Latvia. Surprised to find himself living there, **Robert Cottrell** is even more surprised to find it beguiling

YES, LATVIA IS a bit off the beaten track. And no, if you'd asked me much earlier in life, I would not have expected to make my home here. But marriage to a Latvian diplomat has brought many happy surprises. Not the least of them is Riga, a beguiling city in its glum, inscrutable way, and one that improves steadily on acquaintance. It's a bit ragged at the edges, obviously – but so would you be if you'd spent 50 years in the Soviet Union.

Practically all visitors start off by asking about three things: the language, the weather and the Russians. So let's get those out of the way first.

The Latvian language is one of two surviving members of the Baltic branch of the Indo-European family. In other words, it's much closer grammatically to German than it is to Russian, though it has a lot of Slavic vocabulary. It is akin to Lithuanian, the other Baltic survivor, but not at all like Estonian, which is a Finno-Ugric language very close to Finnish and not much like anything else. One distinctive feature of Latvian is the "s" at the end of singular masculine nouns, which can produce an illusory sense of plenitude. A sign advertising "bars" is referring to one bar only, not several.

The weather, as in England, forms a reliable subject for conversation. It's as if you are in the far north of Scotland, but without the moderating influence of the Gulf Stream, and with the Arctic air rolling straight out of Russia. You do get a purple patch of summer between late May and late July. But by August the autumn is nipping at your ankles, and you know it's going to be overcoats out for the next eight or nine months.

I can't in all fairness say much in favour of the Baltic winter. It's not the cold that gets to you so much as the dark. What passes for day in January is a puddle of grey half-light between 10am and 3pm. If you have any recipes for avoiding depression in such circumstances I'd be pleased to hear them. The most popular ones here involve large admixtures of high-proof spirits, which over time only make things worse.

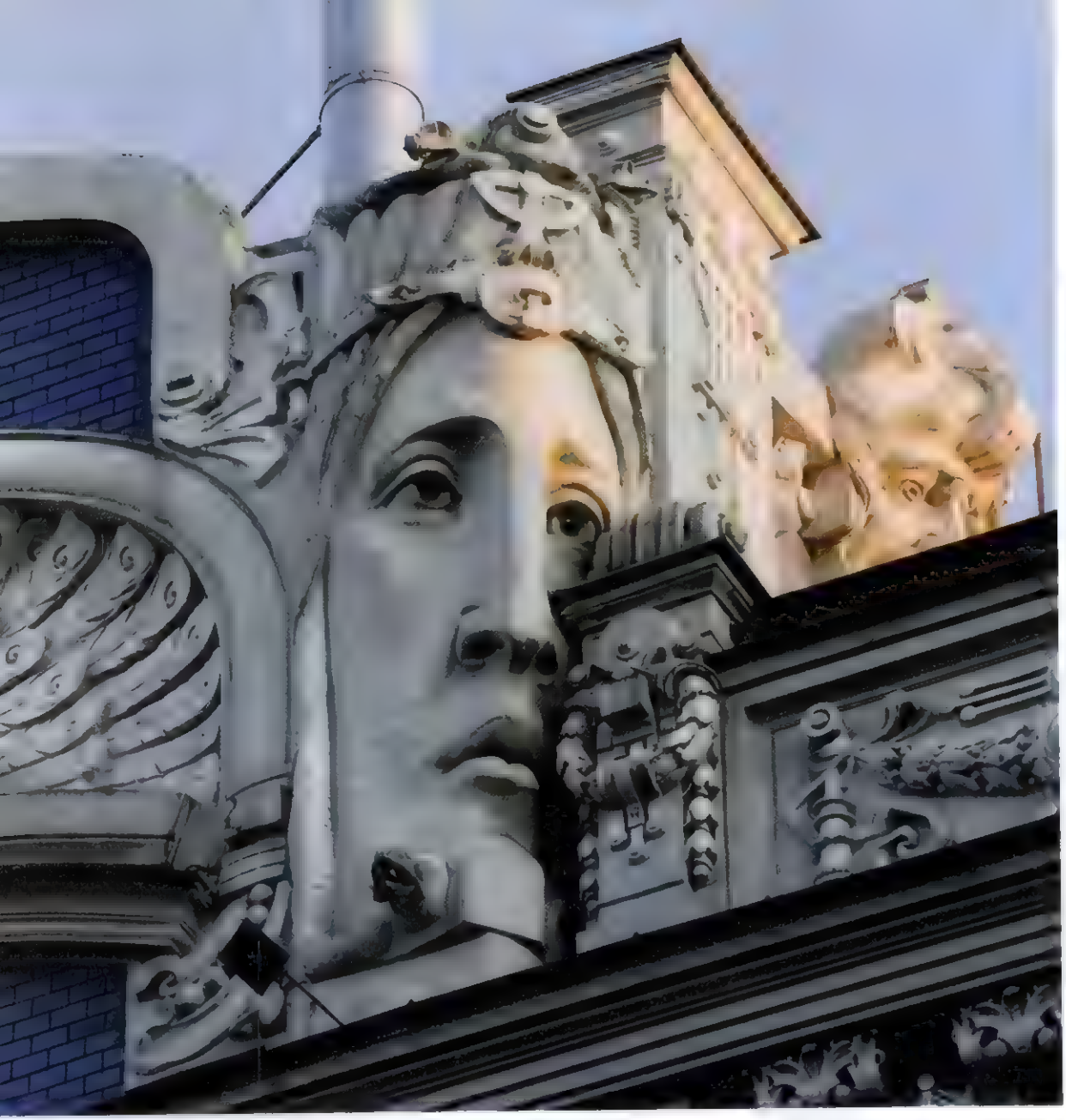
And so to the Russians. The Russian-speaking population of Latvia rose from 12% to 40% between 1935 and 1989, mainly thanks to the post-war Soviet occupation. Russians and Ukrainians were encouraged to move to Latvia in order to Russify the territory and build up its industrial workforce. I would guess that Riga is still predominantly a Russian-speaking city, even though native Russian-speakers are probably now a minority. Russian is the more common shared language between Russian and Latvian speakers, and so is heard more often.

Rather than integration, the two communities seem to have settled on a strategy of avoidance. Each has its own media, its own schools, its own entertainers, its own political parties and public figures. Latvian-speakers control the government. Russian-speakers dominate private enterprise. The government is so poorly resourced that the Latvian advantage there counts for less than you might think.

Riga itself, with a population of 700,000, is a medium-sized city – a walkable city, which is one of the many nice things about it. But it has the depths to absorb you. It possesses, as Saki once said of Crete, a gift for producing more history than can be consumed locally. As in many parts of eastern Europe, people really do seem preoccupied less with things happening today than with events of 20, 60, even 100 years ago.

Every few weeks, flags fly from all large buildings to mark one of the calendar's many remembrance days: three for the Latvians deported and murdered

Facing up to the weather
ABOVE A façade on Elizabetes Street – Latvia's boom years coincided with the flourishing of Art Nouveau
LEFT Riga is walkable, even in a dusting of snow
RIGHT A short winter day dawns over the harbour



4 CORNERS/CORBIS/NORDIC PHOTO

under communism; one for all the victims of the second world war; another specifically for the victims of the Holocaust; a day for the Soviet annexation of Latvia in 1940; a day for those who died fighting for independence in 1918; yet another for those who died in the fighting against Russia in 1991; and an "unofficial" day of general remembrance, for all the fighting dead, on All Souls Day. The result is that for me, at any rate, the Latvian flag has connotations of sadness at least as much as pride.

Then there is plenty more Latvian history predating the Russian period, and, indeed, predating Latvia. Did you know, for instance, that the Duchy of Courland, now part of Latvia, once held Tobago as a colony? But unless you seriously want to get into the fine print of, say, the Polish-Swedish wars, which were headline news here in the 17th century, then, you're better off just enjoying the city that survives. The Old Town, by the river, is a gorgeous mess of 16th-to-19th-century houses and alleyways. Wander through it on a winter night and you're lost in a fairy tale. (Wander >

GOING NATIVE

Where to stay The tourist trade in Riga is highly seasonal. You can't get a good hotel room for love or money for a July weekend, so book early, but in January the hotels can't give them away. The Old Town is picturesque, but can also be noisy – think cobbled streets, buskers and drunks. The safest choice there is probably the **Grand Palace Hotel**, which has been in business for more than a decade and knows how to be grand without being excessively expensive. There's a lovely big bar, with a fire in winter. The chicest place to stay is **Bergs**, a boutique hotel with big, swish modern rooms in a century-old shopping precinct called Berga Bazars. Budget-conscious business travellers should head to the **Radisson Elizabete** (one of four Radissons in town). It's new. It's central. It's cheap. It has well-equipped, medium-sized rooms. And the free Wi-Fi actually works.

Where to eat You may spot the occasional raw vegetable, usually disguised with mayonnaise, but Riga is a pork-and-potato town. To eat cheaply, plentifully and pretty well, go to the **Lido Vermanitis**, a big, classless, always-busy self-service restaurant sizzling with meat and fish. About £5 a head for a soup, a hot dish and a beer. **Botanica** has a popular summer terrace and features a short menu of lighter dishes, which changes each day and nods towards fusion and Mediterranean cooking. About £10 a head for two dishes and a glass of wine. Saving the best for last, pretty much everyone agrees that Martins Ritins is the finest chef in the Baltics. He's been running **Vincent's** for 17 >

> years, and has built up a culture of service, and a network of suppliers, that no other cook can match. It costs about £40 a head for dinner.

Where to shop Riga is not a great shopping town. It's small, relatively poor, and what there was in the way of distinctive retailing suffered in the 2008-10 slump. Having said that, **Riija** is the best one-stop place for up-market local craftsmanship, especially in fabrics, clothes and tableware, with some nice art books, too. **Upe**, in the Old Town, has a delirious collection of wooden musical instruments and a well-curated choice of world and classical CDs. You could shop with your eyes shut and still come away with an unusual gift. **Bastejs Gallery** is the place to start looking for interesting new Latvian painting, which is absurdly cheap by world standards, and occasionally startlingly good. You can take home a Helena Heinrihsone watercolour for £800 and make your sitting-room a brighter, happier place.

Streetwise Walk. Most things are within ten minutes on foot, few are more than 20. The best of the Art Nouveau is on and around **Alberta iela**, at the edge of the city centre. If necessary, call a taxi from **Baltic Taxi** (telephone 8500), and pay what's on the meter, which will be 3-5 lats (£3.60-6.00) within town, and 8 lats to the airport. In summer, go to **Jurmala**, the seaside suburb of Riga, by train from Central Station – look for a train going to Sloka or Tukums and get off at Majori or Dubulti for the beaches. They're gorgeous, and, because the summer is so short, they are relatively undeveloped. It's the seaside of your childhood. - RC

> through it on a Friday evening in summer, on the other hand, and you may find yourself lost in a British stag party. Ryanair has much to answer for.)

Wrapped around the Old Town, in concentric semicircles, are the great streets of the late 19th century, laid out when Riga, and Odessa on the Black Sea, were the main ports of the Russian empire, and Russia's economy was booming. Riga handled the timber trade, Odessa the grain trade. Both had large Jewish communities which were central to their flourishing.

Happily for Riga, the high watermark of its fortunes coincided with the high watermark of *Jugendstil* – Art Nouveau – architecture. The boldest builders hired Mikhail Eisenstein, an architect whose aesthetic sensibility ranged from the operatic to the hysterical. Behind the façades, his buildings are dull and uniform. But oh, the façades! Nudes, giant heads, caryatids, wild blue tiles and cream stucco, gods and horses: like collisions between a wedding cake, an Egyptian temple and a Busby Berkeley film set. For me, there is more to enjoy in Mikhail's work than in that of his son Sergei, who was born and educated in Riga – though serious film-goers will doubtless differ.

Eisenstein's buildings are only the most visible legacy of a golden age of Latvian culture. In that first decade of the 20th century the painter Janis Rozentals, the composer Emils Darzins, the writer Rudolfs Blaumanis – you don't know them, but you should – were still at work. A new generation of geniuses – the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, the photographer Filips Halsmans, the poet Alexander Caks – was just then being born. Some were near-neighbours. Rozentals lived just a few doors from Berlin's family, in apartment-houses designed by Eisenstein.

With so much evidence of past wealth lining the streets, it becomes all the more painful to contemplate Riga's relative poverty today. Latvia has some of the lowest wages in the European Union, and one of the highest unemployment rates. The economy shrank by more than one-quarter during the crash of 2008-10, in large part because the central bank insisted on keeping the local currency, the lat, pegged to the euro. Property prices have fallen by two-thirds and more: I say this with the authority of someone who bought an apartment here at the height of the boom, in 2007. Property in Riga was dearer then than property in Berlin. Now it must rank among the cheapest in the developed world.

Twilight zone
Riga's relative poverty today sits against a backdrop of past wealth

I keep on thinking that the city has to snap back some time, but perhaps it doesn't. Latvia's population has fallen by 15% in the past 20 years, to 2.2m, thanks to emigration and a low birthrate. Outside the Old Town, it is a rarity to encounter a crowded shop or pavement. In some ways this works to one's benefit. In New York, where I used to live, placing a child in a decent school required months of lobbying and scheming. In Riga they want you. You may even have a choice.

When my daughter hurt her ankle in the playground, I drove her to the emergency room of the children's hospital. She was registered within five minutes, seen by a doctor at once, x-rayed, and away again (it was only bruising) inside half an hour. All free. I don't even want to begin to think what a similar exercise would have cost in Manhattan in terms of time, stress and money.

"Come to Riga and break a leg!" doesn't really work all that well as a tourist slogan, but there's something to be said for a city where you can afford a misstep. Let me commend Riga to you without overegging the pudding. This is a quiet, walkable, modest, affordable city, with something to do most evenings, if not lots of things to do every evening. The summers are lovely. You get two cultures – Latvian and Russian – for the price of one. And all the history you can eat. ■

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SNAPSHOT

Tuva, Russia

The past and the future of Tuva, Russia's poorest republic, are captured together in this image of children playing on a beaten-up Lada in front of a disused, Soviet-era factory in the capital Kyzyl. Tuva, in the far south of Siberia on the border with Mongolia, is a remote and inaccessible land of mountains, forests and steppe, much of it under permafrost, inhabited by wolves, bears and snow leopards. Throat-singing is the local art form and the people, many of whom still live in yurts, have a deeply ingrained, spiritual respect for the natural world in which they live.

On Stalin's orders, Tuva was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1944, and a brutal programme of modernisation began: the 32 Buddhist temples were destroyed, lamas and Animist shamans persecuted, and – despite resistance from the mostly nomadic people – farming was collectivised and factories were built. Since the Soviet Union collapsed 20 years ago, there has been a return to traditional nomadic patterns of life, with Shamanism and Buddhism flourishing once more. But Tuva is rich in minerals, including coal, iron ore, gold and cobalt, and a mining industry would be a fast track out of poverty. So far, perhaps learning from others' mistakes, it has resisted that temptation, and is putting its culture ahead of the national bank balance.

This photograph forms part of Oxfam's "After the Thaw" exhibition, which marks the 20th anniversary by showing life in Russia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – the places the charity is currently active. It runs from November 15th to 19th at the Strand Gallery, 32 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6BP. – REBECCA WILLIS

PHOTOGRAPH **JUSTIN JIN**

String of perls

Will Smith takes up knitting

THIS SUMMER A lot of people found themselves sitting up on their sofas all night, watching the English riots, open-mouthed with horror. I was one of them, but I was doubly aghast: in my late-night fug I had mistakenly done two rows perl, rather than knit then perl. If this means anything to you, you'll be able to deduce that I was knitting, and that I was using what is known as a stocking stitch. You will also know my pain. Luckily we had staying with us my mother-in-law, the Yoda of knitting. By which I mean she is an expert knitter, not that she is two feet tall and syntactically eccentric.

It was my own fault, I had broken two of my three self-imposed rules of knitting: don't knit drunk, late, or while watching television. After my introductory three-hour lesson I could at first knit only if completely focused, telling myself at each wind of the wool that "right needle goes behind left" for knit stitch, and "right needle in front of left" for perl. The flicker of horror drivers experience when they realise they've been on the road for five minutes without thinking about it is nothing compared with mentally surfacing in the middle of knitting: your sub-conscious hands over the baton to your conscious mind, and your conscious mind invariably fumbles it.

When you refocus behind the wheel of a car, you haven't forgotten how to use the pedals. Yet many times early in my summer of knitting I would find myself looking at my hands, unable to remember what I had just done or was meant to be doing next. My inability to account for my actions inevitably meant that a mistake lurked among the loops and twists. No amount of books and apps and YouTube videos can compete with having a teacher (or a mother-in-law) who can look at a row of stitches and discern the source of the chaos in the order.

In public I was self-conscious at first about my new hobby. "What do your friends think of you knitting?" asked a helpful assistant on the knitting counter at Liberty in London, when I went in to ask advice about seaming the hat I was working on.

"They think it's fun," I lied. I hadn't told my friends. Not because knitting is stigmatised as an old lady's hobby, but because I worry it will come across as the kind of studied eccentricity common to a certain kind of metropolitan young man. I associate male knitting with ironically waxed moustaches and the sporting of feathered alpine hats.

But then the fact that I knitted solely at home started to affect my marriage. It understandably grated on my wife's nerves that I could only engage in conversation between rows. Her sigh-rate shot up whenever I got the wool out, so eventually I decided to get over my hang-ups and come out as a knitter. I presented myself at a local café where a knitting club was rumoured to gather. On arrival I couldn't spot anyone who looked like a knitter – but then they might have been thinking the same thing about me. Unable to utter the phrase "Here for the knitting?", I took my courage, and needles, in both hands, and started.

As soon as I picked up the needles, I regretted it. I felt I was giving off waves of smugnesss: "Look at me, I'm a man, and I'm knitting! Intrigued? This is just the tip of my iceberg of quirks." I couldn't bear to make eye-contact with anyone in the café – which was handy, as it meant I got a couple of rows done with excellent tension and no dropped or extra stitches.

Thankfully the techniques eventually became second nature. Assistants at the knitting counters of department stores are now spared my weekly visits and rudimentary questions. My mother-in-law, too, has gone back to enjoying her evenings uninterrupted by requests to squint at my mistakes via Skype. My new-found competence hasn't, however, made knitting any less absorbing. It seems magical, this transformation of skeins of yarn into a solid entity. I've veered from irritation at how long this mission has taken – as I write, the scarf is still unfinished, though long enough to adorn one of those neck-stretching tribal women – to an inability to stop. I am like a human spider, working in solitude, content to try, try again. So I've bought a knitting pattern for a jumper with a frog on it, to make for my baby son, Leo. I'll make it in the "age 4 years" size, though. It'll probably take me that long to finish it. ■

It grated on my wife's nerves that I could only engage in conversation between rows

PHOTOGRAPH **RICHARD LEA HAIR**

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